

Gifts of the Nile

From Egypt to a Baltimorean's Bookshelf

Paralyzed by fear, I stared into the eyes of the dead. The leathery skin was pulled and puckered around the skeletal infrastructure of the face, and — even after being held by death for thousands of years — his sharp features looked alive. The docent's voice had disappeared into the overwhelming sound of my heartbeat. Within minutes of entering the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's Egypt exhibit, my six-year-old mind became a captive of the ancient Egyptian people. I was bound and enchanted by the gold, the picture writing, the foreign hybrid gods. A million questions pulsed through my body, and the answers called my name, begged my undivided attention. I needed to understand the secrets of the Nile, and I vowed that day to do everything in my power to do so.

I began this quest at a very young age. Every year from that moment onward, my holiday wish-lists were peppered with the works of great (and not quite so great) archaeologists, philologists, historians, and art historians. In order to attain an understanding of ancient Egypt, I attained a collection of books concerning it.

As my interests have become more focused with age, more of my collection has come to emphasize the religious and magical practices of the ancient Egyptians. I approach these topics from a variety of angles, a practice that my book collection reflects. Academically, I feel it is important to incorporate many different types of scholarship when researching ancient Egyptian religion; only through the employment of varied methodologies can one attain a full understanding of ancient Egyptian religion and all its complexities. Philological and textual sources are paramount, given the rich corpus of funerary spells and rites penned throughout Egyptian history. Likewise, the recorded myths of ancient Egypt are also key in understanding the nature of its extensive pantheon. However, archaeological sources are also of high importance; it would be impossible to attempt a full understanding of Egyptian religious practices without some consideration of its varied and impressive settings: temples, tombs, and households, just to name a few. I also have collected quite a number of books concerning the art of ancient Egypt. Magical and religious objects provide practical insight into the ritual behaviors of the ancient Egyptians. Exploration of material culture is just as necessary to understanding the mind of a civilization as textual and archaeological evidence.

Finally, I also like to incorporate some classical anthropology. I think a solid anthropological background is conducive to considered and thoughtful work on cultural issues, hence my hefty collection of anthropological classics. My academic approach to ancient Egyptian religion and magic can best be described as all inclusive — a fact that can easily be observed by a quick visit to my bookshelf.

Furthermore, my bookshelf reflects a myriad of concerns within the realm of ancient Egyptian religion and magic. A wide range of religious and magical concerns are represented, ranging from funerary rites to religious festivals to magical household objects. I do not restrict my collection, but rather welcome books dealing with any facet of ancient Egypt and its highly intriguing practices. Like the scholarly philosophy that governs my collection, the Egyptological philosophy is quite similar: all material and approaches can — and should! — be used to complement one another. For example, an understanding of state religion (government regulated religion) and nationally ubiquitous cultic behaviors is necessary to understanding more individualized household practices. Likewise, the rites associated with birth stem from the same core beliefs that drive funerary ones, and knowledge of seemingly paradoxical entities can lead to a deepened understanding of the thoughts and beliefs that drive religion at large.

I fancy my current bookshelf to be a Wunderkammer of sorts, housing faux Egyptian scarab amulets, canopic jars, and an Anubis shrine, just to name several of the oddities that it boasts. But, the thing that is truly “wunderbar” about my bookshelf is the knowledge it boasts of ancient Egypt. As the Greek historian Herodotus famously said, Egypt is the “gift of the Nile” — and its ancient secrets are its gift to me.



Bibliography



“House of Books” (per-medja)

1. Aldred, Cyril. *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum and the Viking Press, 1973.

This is the seminal work on a very peculiar time in ancient Egypt’s history: the Amarna Period. During this period (ca. 1350 BCE), the great pharaoh Akhenaten attempted to change Egypt’s polytheistic state religion to a henotheistic one, focusing on worship of the sun disc, the Aten. Complementing this revolutionary religious upheaval, the king moved Egypt’s capital to virgin soil (a site called “Akhetaten,” or “Horizon of the Aten”) and changed the state artistic style to one that many art historians refer to as more expressive and tender than the one it replaced. Aldred’s book outlines the history of this period and offers some of the most fundamental theories as to why these changes occurred, thusly influencing scholarship on the Amarna Period for decades to come.

2. Allen, James P. *The Art of Medicine in Ancient Egypt*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005.

This book accompanied an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. A catalogue of exhibited items, the book provides an overview of the medical practices of the ancient Egyptians throughout their history via material culture. Often at times conflated with magical practices, many of the medical instruments and documents are of a religious character, resembling spells, prayers, and ritual objects. In ancient Egypt, the many perilous diseases of the Nile Valley were combatted by priests and physicians alike — in fact, the two were often the same.

3. Andrews, Carol. *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

Amulets were used in ancient Egypt for a myriad of reasons, as is succinctly and engagingly outlined in this work. These objects were used in medical and magical practices, serving purposes from apotropaia to fertility. Andrews outlines each of the many types of ancient Egyptian amulets and consequently discusses their usage with extensive illustrations from the British Museum’s collection.

4. Atkinson, Austen. *Lost Civilizations*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2002.

A work intended for popular consumption, this delightful and fast-paced work focuses on ancient archaeological sites from all over the world. Using satellite imagery and GIS, Atkinson demystifies and illustrates the layout of many archaeological sites — as well as the scientific practices of many archaeologists. Though the work does not focus on Egypt, it still provides a concise and approachable overview of archaeological practices which should be applied when examining Egyptian archaeological sites.

5. Brewer, Douglas J. and Emily Teeter. *Egypt and the Egyptians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

The expansive and exhausting history of Egypt is summed up quite nicely in this portable beginner's guide. This narrative overview of ancient Egypt approaches the civilization from a variety of perspectives, providing a digestible and still highly academic introduction to ancient Egypt.

6. David, Rosalie and Rick Archbold. *Conversations with Mummies : New Light on the Lives of Ancient Egyptians*. Toronto: Madison Press Books, 2000.

Providing an unconventional approach to the study of ancient Egyptian life, this book aims to illuminate the quotidian activities of different ancient Egyptian individuals via the physical examination of their mummies. Through X-rays, CT scans, and other medical approaches, the authors learn about the daily encounters of ancient Egyptians by pathology and osteology. Additionally, close examination of the bodies' posthumous treatment reveals information about burial practices and, consequently, religious beliefs. The authors use a large sample of mummies spanning both millennia and social strata, studying peasants, craftsmen, religious figures, and pharaohs alike.

7. Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. Abingdon: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.

This classical anthropological treatise examines the problem of societal taboo. Douglas deconstructs why taboo exists and how societies deal with their respective taboos. Since magical practices — particularly those in ancient Egypt — are often meant to maintain order and prevent/rectify transgressive behavior and other evils, Douglas's work provides a powerful ground from which one can begin to understand *why* these practices existed.

8. Faulkner, Raymond. *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*. Oxford: Griffith Institute and Ashmolean Museum, 1991.

A perfect companion to any translation. Middle Egyptian — the “classical” phase of the ancient Egyptians' language — can prove rather tricky, but Faulkner's portable and comprehensive dictionary is a helpful tool in translating any Middle Egyptian text, from military annals to *Coffin Text* spells.

9. Freed, Rita E. *Egypt's Golden Age : The Art of Living in the New Kingdom 1558-1085 B.C.* Boston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1981.

This exhibition catalogue accompanied a traveling exhibition that focused on artifacts of daily life from the New Kingdom, a period thought to be one of the most prosperous and cosmopolitan for the ancient Egyptians. The beautifully illustrated catalogue shows the stunning decorative work of some of the objects in great detail. From gardening tools to tableware, many of the decorative programs inscribed on these relics of the quotidian demonstrate the importance of Egyptian religion and help in understanding its importance in the private sphere, particularly in the course of day-to-day life.

10. Friedmann, Florence Dunn. *Gifts of the Nile : Ancient Egyptian Faience*. Providence: Thames and Hudson, The RISD Museum, 1999.

One of the most important materials in the production of ancient Egyptian art was faience, a powdered quartz-based ceramic with surface vitrification. Since the primary material in the production of faience was sand and its bright and vitreous coating made it resemble a precious material, faience was widely utilized in a variety of arts. From funerary shabtis, to ritual marsh bowls, to sistra, to simple bookplates, faience was utilized for objects in all spheres, both sacred and profane. Many of its beautiful products can be viewed in this exhibition catalogue, which boasts a gorgeous temporal and practical variety of faience artifacts.

11. Hawass, Zahi. *Secrets from the Sand : My Search for Egypt's Past*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003.

Penned by the former Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt and Minister of State for Antiquities Affairs (and also star of the History Channel's rather controversial *Chasing Mummies*), this book chronicles the career of one of the most famous Egyptian archaeologists: Zahi Hawass. As a captivating and impassioned storyteller, Hawass leads the reader through his most triumphant archaeological accomplishments in Egypt, while detailing the significance of his most influential finds. The famed Egyptologist — most renowned in scholarly communities for his work in cemeteries and funerary complexes — provides insight into the minds of the ancient Egyptians and their religious practices through relating his own personal experiences.

12. Hayes, Michael. *The Egyptians*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1998.

Intended for popular consumption, this pocket guide to the ancient Egyptian New Kingdom (ca. 1550—1069 BCE) covers topics from temple complexes to amulets, briefly encompassing almost all aspects of ancient Egyptian religion. With gorgeous illustrations and quick facts, this digestible work is a handy reference when considering the New Kingdom.

13. Haywood, John. *Historical Atlas of the Ancient World : 4000000 - 500 BC*. New York: Metrobooks, 2000.

This collection of maps is a very helpful reference when considering the ever changing landscape of the ancient world. The maps provided in this book provide a cursory view into the greater landscape that ancient Egypt inhabited, demonstrating the changing sociopolitical and geographic boundaries of Africa, the ancient Near East, and the Mediterranean. The book spans many millennia, showing the position of Egypt throughout the first 2500 years of its history and the entirety of its prehistory.

14. James, T.G.H. *Tutankhamun : The Eternal Splendor of the Boy Pharaoh*. New York: Fall River Press, 2000.

As one of the most important discoveries of ancient Egyptian material, the largely undisturbed tomb of Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh Tutankhamun provided an invaluable glance into how ancient Egyptian royal burials appeared in antiquity. Illustrated with absolutely stunning photographs, the objects from the king's tomb are comprehensively

published in this work. The iconography and usages of each object are detailed by James, and he frequently emphasizes the religious character of many of Tutankhamun's burial goods.

15. Oakes, Lorna and Lucia Gahlin. *Ancient Egypt : An illustrated reference to the myths, religions, pyramids and temples of the land of the pharaohs*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2006.

This brief popular encyclopedia of ancient Egypt serves as a handy A-Z guide for all things ancient Egypt. A portable and reliable source, its approachable writing style and comprehensiveness make it a great field guide.

16. Perdu, Olivier and Raphaële Merffe, eds. *Le crépuscule des pharaons : Chefs-d'oeuvre des dernières dynasties égyptiennes*. Brussels: Fonds Mercator, 2012.

A phenomenally illustrated work, this hefty book provides information on the portraiture of Egypt's last native kings. Before the dawn of the Ptolemaic (Greek) Period, Egypt saw a host of different personalities in its final centuries. As these personalities were literally set in stone, the expressive and engaging royal portraiture of Egypt's Late Period warrants its own discussion. Though not directly related to magic or religion, understanding the changing paradigm of kingship throughout Egypt's history is important to understanding its entire history, including the changes and growths its religion experienced.

17. Pinch, Geraldine. *Egyptian Mythology : A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

A hand-guide to ancient Egyptian religion, this work is absolutely essential to any beginning student of ancient Egyptian religion. Though a confusing and highly esoteric topic, Pinch explains ancient Egyptian religion and its major tenants deftly and concisely. Pinch then provides a brief list of A-Z entries on important topics in ancient Egyptian religion (including gods, locations, practices, and themes), which include individual primary and secondary bibliographic material.

18. ———. *Magic in Ancient Egypt*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

This seminal and semi-popular work provides an overview of the household magical practices of the ancient Egyptians, including discussions of magical objects (like amulets and wands), rituals and their mythological origins, and the sacralized spaces in which magic was conducted.

19. Pirelli, Rosanna. *The Queens of Ancient Egypt*. Vercelli: White Star S.p.A., 2008.

Queenship in ancient Egypt was, in many ways, as politically and socially significant as kingship. The strong and powerful queens of ancient Egypt were political and cultic leaders, assuming important societal roles. This stunningly illustrated work details the responsibilities of some of Egypt's most influential queens.

20. Mauss, Marcel. *A General Theory of Magic*. Abingdon: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

Another classical anthropological treatise dealing with the issue of magic and its practice, Mauss's progressive and seminal turn of the century work (it was originally published in 1902) influenced the way that magic would be perceived by scholars for decades to come. Mauss

grapples with defining magic as discrete from religion whilst understanding the impetuses for its practice and its general aims. He also aims to understand the common conditions under which magic is practiced in hopes that cross-cultural continuities will further illuminate the nature of magic. Of course, application of Mauss's theories to Egyptological concerns proves a fruitful measure, as viewing ancient Egyptian magical practice through an anthropological lens can allow that greater understanding of the ancient Egyptians' motivations for partaking in magical practices.

21. Reeves, Nicholas. *Egypt's False Prophet: Akhenaten*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001.

This semi-popular work is an updated overview of the Amarna Period and the reign of Akhenaten (see item #1, Aldred). Reeves provides some interesting and revolutionary work on the topic, offering challenging perspectives concerning Akhenaten's radical policies. Reeves incorporates archaeological, textual, philosophical, and art historical methodologies in his argumentation, making his work all the richer.

22. Robins, Gay. *The Art of Ancient Egypt*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

As one of the only comprehensive art historical works offered on the topic of ancient Egypt, this book is essential to the collection of any proper Egyptomaniac. Robins surveys over 3000 years of relief sculpture, sculpture in the round, and painting in order to provide a complete narrative of ancient Egypt's art. A succinct and clear piece, it is a necessary starting point for any person interested in exploring ancient Egypt from an art historical perspective, particularly those interested in sculpture. Much of the art discussed in this book was excavated in sacralized spaces, making its connection to ancient Egyptian religion and magic quite clear.

23. ———. *Women in Ancient Egypt*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

The history of Egypt is too often interpreted solely through a male perspective, but Robins aims to rectify this unfortunate reality with this book. She uses female tombs, living spaces, objects, and records to reconstruct the daily lives of ancient Egyptian females from all different social strata. Robins's revolutionary approach to ancient Egyptian history sheds light on many practices unique to women, including those surrounding pregnancy and childbirth and particular cultic roles intended solely for females.

24. Shulz, Regine and Matthias Seidel. *Egyptian Art: The Walters Art Museum*. London: GILES, 2009.

A guide to Baltimore's own stunning Egyptian art collection, this book is a must have for any Egyptomaniac — or any Baltimorean, for that matter! The permanent Egyptian collection at the Walters Art Museum boasts objects of many different characters, including scribal instruments, pharaonic portraiture, and even a Third Intermediate Period mummy. Through this unique collection, much about ancient Egypt can be learned, and this succinct catalogue of its highlights provides many interesting facts about the uses and powers of the collection's ancient artifacts.

25. Schwaller de Lubicz, R.A. *Temples of Karnak*. Rochester: Inner Traditions International, Ltd, 1999.

Karnak was the site of many of ancient Egypt's most important temple complexes, as it was strategically located near its longtime capital, Thebes. This comprehensive and fully illustrated work discusses the many monuments of Karnak in great detail, providing perhaps the best overview of the site available. Schwaller de Lubicz also provides some interpretative work on the region, proposing some theories regarding the ritual use and activation of Karnak's sacred landscape.

26. Simpson, William Kelly, ed. *The Literature of Ancient Egypt : An Anthology of Stories, Instruction, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.

This essential work provides reliable and insightful translations of many of ancient Egypt's most enduring texts, including many myths and spells.

27. Van De Mieroop, Marc. *A History of the Ancient Near East*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

As a brief and comprehensive history of the entire ancient Near East, this book is important to fully understanding ancient Egypt in its Near Eastern context. Ancient Egypt maintained important economic and military relations with the rest of the ancient Near East, and the more that can be understood about Egypt's partners and foes (Levantine peoples, Mesopotamians, Hittites, Persians, etc.), the more that can be understood about their relationships with Egypt. Additionally, the exchange of goods and ideas was frequent throughout the ancient Near East, so an understanding of Near Eastern material and intellectual culture can provide insight to borrowed Egyptian practices.

28. Wendrich, Willeke, ed. *Egyptian Archaeology*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

This edited collection of essays provides the different possible theoretical achievements of archaeological inquiry, with essays on topics as diverse as gender roles, state formation, and cultic landscapes. A brilliant summary of some of the theoretical ongoingings in modern Egyptian archaeology.

Wish List



“To wish or covet” (abi)

1. Allen, James P. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.

This corpus of religious texts was carved on the interior walls of Old Kingdom pyramids (ca. 2353—2107 BCE). The spells were thought to help the deceased royal individual pass safely into the afterlife so that he — or in some cases, she — could achieve immortality. These spells illuminate the early religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, as they detail the roles of certain deities and provide unquestionable evidence for conceptions of death and the afterlife.

2. Faulkner, Raymond O. *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 1973.

Like the *Pyramid Texts*, this is a corpus of religious texts. In the Middle Kingdom, it became common practice to decorate the deceased's coffin with spells for passage into the afterlife. With the democratization of religion in this later period, an evolution in some major theoretical religious underpinnings can be seen from the *Pyramid Texts*. This is perhaps the most important corpus of texts for understanding the religious beliefs and practices of the Middle Kingdom.

3. Hornung, Erik. *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*. Translated by John Baines. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.

This seminal work tackles the major philosophical tenants of ancient Egyptian religion. The mutable nature of the ancient Egyptian pantheon and the multivalent thinking of the ancient Egyptian people often makes the topic of Egyptian religion in antiquity difficult for modern minds to understand, but Hornung accessibly — and brilliantly — addresses these esoteric problems in this influential work.

4. Nicholson, Paul T. and Ian Shaw. *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Though not directly related to religion, this work is essential to the study of ancient Egyptian material culture, including religious and magical objects.

5. Pinch, Geraldine. *Votive Offerings to Hathor*. Oxford: Griffin Institute, Ashmolean Museum, 1993.

The goddess of joy, Hathor, was the recipient of many votive offerings throughout Egyptian history. Consequently, many religious and magical artifacts from ancient Egypt are, in fact, votive offerings to Hathor. With this comprehensive and immensely helpful study of these votive offerings and their sites of offerings, provenance and dating can be provided for many unprovenanced votive offerings to Hathor.

6. Ritner, Robert. *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*. Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1997.

Perhaps the most important work on ancient Egyptian magic, this book approaches the issue from a largely philological perspective. An examination of words (and objects) endowed with magical significance, this work sheds light on the magical practices that defined privatized ancient Egyptian religion.