

No More Heroes: What Is the History of Egyptology Actually For?

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Review of: *Walking Among Pharaohs: George Reisner and the Dawn of Modern Egyptology*. By Peter Der Manuelian. Pp. xxxiv + 1043 pages, 102 figures, 52 plates. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. ISBN 9780197628935. Price US \$45.99.

What are the stakes of the history of Egyptology? Who gets to write it, what is it written about, and who is it written for? Implicit answers to these questions have become well-trodden ground, at least judging by the number of publications devoted to the area.¹ The appearance of Peter Der Manuelian's *Walking Among Pharaohs*, however, puts these queries into sharper focus. At an astonishing 840 pages long (before the index), on one level the book constitutes a comprehensive, meticulously researched biography of George Andrew Reisner (1867–1942): a man whom received opinion has long cast as an Egyptological and archaeological giant, yet one to whom such a volume has never been devoted.² On another level, however, the book is emblematic of a discipline unsure of the stakes of writing its own history. What, today, is (the history of) Egyptology for?³ The tensions in this book relating to that question are palpable.

Try as he might, Der Manuelian cannot hide such tensions behind the recounting of empirical material. Like numerous other recent volumes, *Walking Among Pharaohs* is an exercise in detail; in this case to a truly prodigious degree.⁴ Across an introduction, 26 chapters, and seven sections, Der Manuelian relates the life of Reisner in a

¹ Since the year 2000, synthetic monographs and edited volumes on histories of Egyptology (broadly speaking) include Bednarski, et al. 2021; Buchwald and Josefowicz 2010; Buchwald and Josefowicz 2020; Carruthers 2014; Carruthers 2022; Colla 2007; al-Dasuqi and al-Shalaqa 2015; Gange 2013; Gertzen 2017; Moser 2006; Navratilova, et al. 2019; Navratilova, et al. 2023; Reid 2002; Reid 2015; Riggs 2014; Riggs 2019; Riggs 2021; Sheppard 2022; Stevenson 2019; Thompson 2015a and b; Thompson 2018.

² Fagan 2022 [2014]: 145 casts Reisner as a 'great Egyptologist'. To the consternation of Der Manuelian 2023: 4, however, there is no separate entry for him in a book that assuredly takes up the 'great man' perspective.

³ Beyond the studies listed in n. 1, other works dealing broadly with this question include Jurman 2022; Langer and Matić 2023; Stevenson 2022.

⁴ For a similarly compendious, recently published biography, see Navratilova 2023. For an older, critical – and shorter – example of this sort of work, see Abt 2011.

chronological frame. Early on, we progress from the central protagonist's Indiana childhood to his education in Assyriology and Semitic philology at Harvard; we then move to a period in Berlin that would alter Reisner's life forever. Working amongst the city's Egyptian collections, the Harvard Assyriologist met and took classes in Egyptian language and archaeology from the scholars Kurt Sethe of the University of Berlin and Heinrich Schäfer of the Berlin Egyptian Museum. These and other Berlin Egyptological connections would later serve Reisner well, providing much of the foundation for the rest of his life and career.

Indeed, it seems to have been due to these connections that the one-time Assyriologist turned to what he is known for today: his work in Egyptology and archaeology. After having returned to the US to spend a year teaching at Harvard, further employment at the university fell through, and a job offer at Yale only appeared much too late in the day. Thanks, however, to the preeminent scholar of ancient Egyptian language (and dean of Berlin Egyptology) Adolf Erman – and also to Erman's pupil at the University of Berlin, the archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt – Reisner was invited to join a new international commission in Egypt.⁵ That commission – salaries paid for by the British-controlled Ministry of Public Works and the British and French-run Public Debt Commission – had been established to catalogue the collections of the museum of Egyptian antiquities located in Giza in preparation for the removal of its contents to the new Cairo Egyptian Museum, which opened in 1902. With bumps and shifts of sponsor along the way, the rest, as they say, is history; although that, unfortunately, is also the issue here.

Walking Among Pharaohs is, to a certain degree, history as data: an accumulation of more and more material in an apparent bid to write a 'total' life of Reisner, his family, and his associates, and one which takes in the protagonist's excavations across Egypt and Sudan as leader of what

⁵ On Erman, see Gertzen 2013; Gertzen 2015.

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became the Harvard University-Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition (HU-MFA Expedition; most famously working on the Giza Plateau, but also in Nubia).⁶ Much of that material is valuable, and not discussed elsewhere. Likewise, despite the book's (unjustifiable and physically cumbersome) length, *Walking Among Pharaohs* mostly remains readable, although not without points of repetition that judicious editing could have cut. The day-by-day enumeration of what are sometimes regular events becomes tedious, for example. Do readers really need to know about every single iteration of Joseph Lindon Smith's annual art exhibition at the Giza Plateau's Harvard Camp?⁷ A thematic volume might have avoided such issues.

Nonetheless, foremost among the book's contributions is the way it – in tandem with other recent scholarship in Egyptology and elsewhere – shows how the work of a 'giant' such as Reisner depended on many hundreds of other people, to some extent (although not totally) cutting an otherwise heroic narrative down to size.⁸ Most prominent amongst this 'supporting' cast are inevitably the Qufti foremen who Reisner, alongside other foreign archaeologists working in Egypt, 'trained' and employed to oversee excavation and survey.⁹ In Reisner's case, it has been noted that the decision to train Egyptians rested as much on financial as on other motives: Egyptians were cheaper to employ than Europeans.¹⁰ Reading *Walking Among Pharaohs*, however, one is left with the reasonable impression that, without this now-quiete-storied Qufti work – and the work of the many labourers that Qufti foremen oversaw – Reisner's proverbial legend might be rather less legendary. Furthermore, one might suggest that the methods Reisner has been lionised for developing might not be quite that well known (or even have existed). For one, Reisner's excavations encompassed '45,000 photographs [taken] across twenty-three archaeological sites over more than forty years'.¹¹ Of those, 'Reisner himself had taken about 6,221 photos; Mohammedani Ibrahim's total was 17,450'.¹² Whose vision – and whose photographic gaze – was actually paramount during this work?¹³

Beyond the Quftis, Der Manuelian makes clear Reisner's dependence on other groups of people: the officials, politicians, and donors active in Egypt, Sudan, and the US throughout his career, in addition to the foreign excavation and administrative staff who worked with him, not to mention his family (particularly his wife and daughter, both

named Mary Reisner). The sheer number of people involved in Reisner's career can create issues for the reader: the addition of some sort of 'cast of characters' beyond the list of (for some reason only) 'Western assistants' to Reisner's excavation work at the back of the book would have been helpful.¹⁴ Yet discussion of these previously unsung individuals throughout the volume is generally useful. The work of Evelyn Perkins (1893–1951), expedition clerical assistant from November 1931, is instructive in terms of the large amount of work that that position actually entailed.¹⁵ Likewise, it doubtless helped Reisner significantly when British officials in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan smoothed his and his associates' way in the colony.¹⁶ This is how archaeology actually happens – or does not: the Wall Street Crash of 1929 put paid to Reisner developing an expedition endowment through the largesse of, amongst others, his former Harvard classmate J. P. Morgan Jr.¹⁷

It is *Walking Among Pharaohs*' dogged recounting of the (sometimes literally) day-to-day, however, that also gives me pause, not least because this style of 'total' historical narrative has become so prevalent across Egyptology itself.¹⁸ The historian of science Lorraine Daston has written convincingly of what she terms 'the sciences of the archive': fields of knowledge sharing 'the conviction that information about empirical particulars is intrinsically valuable and worth saving'.¹⁹ With its mass of data – the accrual of which is a key characteristic of the sort of scientific work that Daston analyses – *Walking Among Pharaohs* operates in this vein, and in turn seems to draw on the existence of 'an imagined community [of scholars] that transcends time'.²⁰ The Egyptologists of the future will, presumably, learn the history of their field through such historical/archival material, and have their (timeless) disciplinary identity confirmed by doing so.²¹

Yet others might disagree on these Egyptological 'matters of fact' entirely, or at least wish to question them.²² There lies the rub: one that Der Manuelian, to his credit, acknowledges. To name a few, discussions in recent years have, to an accelerating degree, highlighted Egyptology's relationship with colonialism, its entanglement with scientific racism, and the discipline's often rapacious extraction of – and extraction of value from – objects and bodies.²³ Where does the recounting of what seems to be objective data – of a narrative of apparently settled historical facts – sit in the

⁶ For a different sort of data-rich – and exceedingly useful – volume (constituting a prime reference on the historical Egyptian antiquities trade), see Hagen and Ryholt 2016. Gertzen 2023: 174 makes much the same point about Der Manuelian's book as I do here.

⁷ See e.g. Der Manuelian 2023: 684, 708.

⁸ For Egyptology, see e.g. Doyon 2014; Doyon 2018; Georg 2023; Gold 2019; Quirke 2010; Shalaby, et al. 2020. For such work in the history of science, see e.g. Shapin 2010.

⁹ On the Quftis in particular, see Doyon 2014; Doyon 2018; Quirke 2010.

¹⁰ Reid 2015: 94.

¹¹ Der Manuelian 2023: 810.

¹² Der Manuelian 2023: 810.

¹³ On this question in Egyptology, see Riggs 2016; Riggs 2017; Riggs 2019.

¹⁴ Der Manuelian 2023: 847–849.

¹⁵ Der Manuelian 2023: 655.

¹⁶ See e.g. Der Manuelian 2023: 340.

¹⁷ Der Manuelian 2023: 623–624.

¹⁸ There is something of Breasted's fruitlessly exhaustive 'Chicago House Method' in the sort of 'total archive' that Der Manuelian 2023 proffers. For the method, see Abt 2011: 292–295. On total archives, see e.g. Lustig 2022.

¹⁹ Daston 2012: 184.

²⁰ Daston 2012: 164 (on data), 184 (quote).

²¹ See Daston 2012: 184 for this process in relation to science more generally.

²² On 'matters of fact' in the history of science, see e.g. Shapin and Schaffer 2011 [1985]: 25.

²³ See e.g. Challis 2013; Riggs 2014; Stevenson 2019; Stienne 2022.

face of such challenges? In *Walking Among Pharaohs*, Der Manuelian admits that he grappled with these issues: ‘I am perhaps guilty of overly focusing on George Reisner’s positive achievements’, he says.²⁴ Likewise, ‘the complex labor relations and international politics at play in Egypt and Sudan during the early twentieth century require far more study and expertise than can be provided here’.²⁵

Yet reading this book – and other work elsewhere – it seems that there is often a disavowal of what it is that historians and other, critical scholars do and might offer.²⁶ It is a truism to state that Egyptology has long remained isolated from other disciplines.²⁷ And in some cases that statement – often made by archaeologists to support their own scientific leanings – no longer stands (if it ever did), not least because Egyptology has long been embedded within the mainstream of heritage.²⁸ That position has arisen, for instance, through the field’s entanglement with the development funding and technical assistance work – think archaeological field schools – familiar from other contexts.²⁹ Nevertheless, one particular form of Egyptological isolation does seem palpable: a position in which the field is increasingly interested in and engaged with its history, yet simultaneously one where ‘outside’ readings of that history seem to be less than trusted.³⁰

Some amount of critical distance, though, is always useful: other readings bring fresh eyes to complex problems. Those readings also provide the methodological tools that help in that process, and that writing a biography of someone like Reisner – as Der Manuelian implies – requires. As the book repeatedly emphasises, Reisner’s career very clearly took place through, and was enabled by, the vagaries of Britain’s colonial domination of Egypt, not to mention the ‘triangulated conquest’ of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.³¹ Taking wider methodological tools into account in this

historical context would have been useful because, throughout *Walking Among Pharaohs*, there is a clear tendency to slide into the recent ‘both sides’ approach to writing colonial and imperial history that has forced historians ever further into the culture wars.³²

Consequently, Der Manuelian’s volume often becomes history as excuse, seemingly taking recent discussions of colonialism and scientific racism as straightforward exercises in disciplinary attack. Hewing to the ‘both sides’ scales, he notes that, in the area of race in particular, Reisner’s ‘scorecard is mixed’.³³ Yet ‘we might ask’, he writes, ‘whether the prism of today’s attempts to remedy the many injustices in our own society distorts the context of the first half of the twentieth century?’³⁴ It is unclear why we might ask this question, however. Such historical discussions – very often long-lived ones – are in fact workaday exercises in understanding, for instance, past scientific practice and the conditions that enabled it: of setting out the (often undeniable) facts in another way, and of understanding, crucially, why that history has conditioned ‘the many injustices in our own society’ that Der Manuelian himself highlights.

Why seek to exculpate Reisner, especially given that the archaeologist’s racial thought was clear? Throughout the volume, Der Manuelian discusses Reisner’s racism, often unsparingly: lecturing at Harvard in 1911, Reisner stated that ‘at present it is the white race and indeed the European white race which leads’.³⁵ In 1913, meanwhile, excavating at Kerma in Sudan (now considered the key site of a complex indigenous polity), Reisner ‘could only associate [the site’s] cultural sophistication with Egyptians’.³⁶ Reisner’s thought was as interlaced with scientific racism as many other archaeologists of the time, and also as inconsistent: while stubbornly Egyptocentric in relation to Nubia and Sudan, he rejected Petrie’s favoured ‘dynastic race’ theory of outsiders bringing civilisation to Egypt.³⁷

It is unclear why Der Manuelian therefore feels the need to suggest that ‘we can value his [Reisner’s] excavations, the chronological frameworks, and the ceramic sequences, even as we set aside today the narrow vision of Nubian culture’.³⁸ To return to the perspective of the history of science, one (useful) aphorism insists that ‘solutions to the problem of knowledge are solutions to the problem of social order’.³⁹ By enacting racial thought, Reisner’s scientific practice embodied – and made – his contemporary social order, and shows how impossible it is to separate what someone thought and did when grappling with their work today: Reisner’s ceramic sequences cannot be separated from his other actions, as much as that outcome might

²⁴ Der Manuelian 2023: 6.

²⁵ Der Manuelian 2023: 7.

²⁶ Most astonishingly in Gertzen 2020, but see also the blurb of Navratilova, et al. 2023, which, addressing ‘supporting characters’ in Egyptology, emphasises that ‘this is not intended to work to the detriment of the lead actors, nor is the intention to politicize disciplinary history’. Why make this qualification in a world where historical study – although not archaeological works like Fagan 2022 [2014] – long ago rejected the ‘heroic’ perspective?

²⁷ When I was an undergraduate in the early 2000s, my lecturers cited both Lustig 1997 and Weeks 1979 as studies attempting to overcome this situation, in addition to Kemp 1989.

²⁸ On the history and implications of scientism for Egyptology, see e.g. Gange 2013: 291–297.

²⁹ See Everett n.d. for a celebratory account of archaeological field schools in Egypt. For a broader historical perspective on the beginnings of such training work and its entanglement with Cold War aid programmes, see Carruthers 2017.

³⁰ Gertzen 2020 again seems to demonstrate this attitude, which, as Gavroglu 2022: 811–817 makes clear, is often a problem for historians of science more generally as they attempt to write social and cultural histories of scientific work. For one attempt to think through this issue in relation to Egyptology, see Jurman 2022. Cf. Abd el Gawad 2023 for this point in relation to who, exactly, gets to assert a ‘decolonial’ narrative.

³¹ On the ‘triangulated conquest’ of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, see throughout Trout Powell 2003.

³² On the ‘both sides’ approach, see e.g. Satia 2022.

³³ Der Manuelian 2023: 5.

³⁴ Der Manuelian 2023: 5–6.

³⁵ Der Manuelian 2023: 248.

³⁶ Der Manuelian 2023: 301.

³⁷ Der Manuelian 2023: 105 on Reisner’s Egyptocentrism. On Petrie’s ‘dynastic race’ (and scientific racism in Egyptology more generally), see e.g. Challis 2013.

³⁸ Der Manuelian 2023: 822.

³⁹ Shapin and Schaffer 2011 [1985]: 332.

be desired.⁴⁰ This point should not be a controversial one, and it is unclear why Der Manuelian is reluctant simply to let it be.

Consequently, *Walking Among Pharaohs* becomes a Whiggish history that clings to a ‘great man’ narrative and doesn’t quite explain the stakes of Reisner’s work.⁴¹ Why did Reisner do what he did, why was he able to do those things, and why should readers think that he was important? The book cannot answer these questions in a satisfactory way because the volume’s analytical frame is itself: a tautological account of the history of Egyptology judged by the history and apparent unerring success of that discipline and its related fields. Throughout the volume, Der Manuelian discusses the importance of Reisner’s methods for the development not just of Egyptology but, more broadly, archaeology. Yet the parameters used to evaluate that discussion are those set forward by those disciplines today, not the sort of historical understanding that helps to explain why such parameters developed. Reisner’s application of archaeological stratigraphy may well have been pioneering.⁴² Likewise, the ‘Reisner-Fisher method’ may well have ‘set a high bar for Levantine archaeology’.⁴³ Yet a list of names of those who praised Reisner or were influenced by him does not explain why they valued his work, nor does it explain what the conditions were that allowed Reisner’s methods to obtain value.⁴⁴

What, indeed, were Reisner’s methods? At times Der Manuelian answers this question clearly. In 1900, for instance, Reisner lined up twenty men across a large space east of the Upper Egyptian village of Quft, telling them to dig shallow holes and check the geological formations within. Each man would then move forward about eighty centimetres before digging a new hole and repeating the observation. Yet Der Manuelian’s detailed description of practice here is also undermined by a lack of power in analysis. Organising this survey, Der Manuelian states that Reisner ‘created archaeology’s earliest subsurface survey system’.⁴⁵ Perhaps, indeed, the archaeologist really had done so. Yet this is an analytical statement made with the benefit of hindsight. Why, actually, does this supposed ‘first’ matter, and who does it – and did it – matter to? These questions are left unanswered.

Other discussions of Reisner’s ‘workflow’ pose similar questions.⁴⁶ Claims about Reisner’s systematic use of documentation – and general systematisation of the archaeological work he led – sit centrally to the book’s analysis of him, as has long been the case in archaeological histories.⁴⁷

Reisner developed a clear numbering system for tombs at Giza, for instance.⁴⁸ He also insisted on ‘full recording’, with documentation ‘in all available media’.⁴⁹ Throughout the work of the HU-MFA expedition, one Qufti *reis* central to that work, Said Ahmed Said Diraz (d. 1926), also kept an Arabic diary that was later continued by others. Of all this documentation, however, only the Arabic diary – a vital record in a volume otherwise based on European-language sources – is illustrated, and even then only once.⁵⁰ More generally, it is difficult to understand how Reisner’s recording process worked without more detailed discussions than the book presents. Der Manuelian, moreover, seems to ignore recent research that reveals the strategic nature of such documentation in terms of who stood able to control work in Egyptology.⁵¹ This omission is startling, because what the Arabic diary points to is the possibility – perhaps more than any other available source – that the discipline’s Euro-American protagonists did not in fact have it all their own way.⁵²

Further puncturing the Euro-American bubble, Der Manuelian’s discussion of Reisner’s apparently meticulous recording techniques stands in contrast to the issues that those techniques caused. The sheer amount of excavation material needing to be published led to substantial delays: the HU-MFA work has continued to cause a publication backlog, but even in the 1930s ‘fading paper and ink records’ had started to create problems.⁵³ What, one might ask, was meticulous about recording media whose permanence was far from certain? And what does that situation suggest about the aspirations of a ‘science of the archive’ like Egyptology? Anyone who has ever researched old expedition records will have experienced such issues, and the more recent practice of moving everything online in no way ensures that such problems will fall by the wayside: digital resources are fallible, too.⁵⁴

Related to this documentary issue is Reisner’s claim (summarised by Der Manuelian) that archaeology should possess a ‘focus on historical research rather than a hunt for museum-worthy beautiful objects’.⁵⁵ With the need for financial support and institutional sponsorship to continue his work, this tension is one that Reisner – like many other archaeologists – seems to have been unable to negotiate successfully. He may well have criticised Howard Carter as ‘not a scientific archaeologist [who] has a financial interest in booming’ the tomb of Tutankhamun.⁵⁶ Yet *Walking*

⁴⁰ For this entanglement between archaeological thought and material practice elsewhere, see Abu el-Haj 2001.

⁴¹ See, again, Der Manuelian’s (2023: 4) consternation that Reisner does not receive an entry in a ‘great man’ archaeological history like Fagan 2022 [2014].

⁴² Der Manuelian 2023: 826.

⁴³ Der Manuelian 2023: 506.

⁴⁴ For that list, see Der Manuelian 2023: 814–815, 826.

⁴⁵ Der Manuelian 2023: 83.

⁴⁶ The term ‘workflow’ is anachronistic. For its use in the book, see e.g. Der Manuelian 2023: 493.

⁴⁷ See e.g. Thompson 2018: 10.

⁴⁸ Der Manuelian 2023: 130.

⁴⁹ Der Manuelian 2023: 103.

⁵⁰ Der Manuelian 2023: 777.

⁵¹ See e.g. (with apologies for citing myself) Carruthers 2020; Riggs 2019; Shalaby, et al. 2020.

⁵² Der Manuelian mentions the centrality of the Arabic diaries to the HU-MFA Expedition throughout the book, but such concerns do not seem to be a focus. The same diaries are now the focus of the *Quft Project*, for which see <<https://quft.fas.harvard.edu/>> (accessed 22.05.24).

⁵³ Der Manuelian 2023: 697. On similar problems elsewhere, see Brusius 2017.

⁵⁴ On the fallibility of digital resources, see e.g. Kuan 2014.

⁵⁵ Der Manuelian 2023: 103.

⁵⁶ Der Manuelian 2023: 481, quoting Reisner.

Among Pharaohs reveals that Reisner was just as interested in the financial value of the objects he excavated as anyone else involved in that process.⁵⁷ That extractive practice provides clear impetus to questions about why so much material from Reisner's and other excavations was removed to collections across Europe and America; in Boston, Giza packing crates were still being opened as late as (shockingly) 2005.⁵⁸

The story of artefact accumulation by Euro-American institutions is, as ever, not one from which archaeologists emerge with flying colours. At times, too, the practices Der Manuelian describes retain their capacity to startle. Despite claims of Reisner's 'responsible excavation', the American was clearly as rapacious as any other archaeologist involved in extracting material from Egypt and Sudan.⁵⁹ Hoisting Middle Kingdom coffins from cliff burials at the site of Deir el-Bersha in 1915, Reisner's team applied varnish in an attempt to preserve fragile stucco surfaces now exposed to daylight for the first time in several thousand years.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, 'instead of adhering the stucco to the wood, it produced the opposite effect'.⁶¹ Likewise, the lid of one Djehuty-Nakht's outer coffin, hoisted by twenty men, found itself scraped on the overhanging rock.⁶² 'Reisner', however, 'was delighted by the find ... guaranteeing a substantial addition to the Middle Kingdom collections of the MFA'.⁶³ Yet it is unclear why it is worth celebrating the exposure of intentionally buried objects and bodies to damage, whether now or at the time: Reisner's colleague Joseph Lindon Smith in fact wrote about his dismay at the unwrapping of a mummified body at Giza in 1933.⁶⁴

On another note, Reisner's career – and Der Manuelian does make this point clear – provides a further example of how individuals actively worked to value some excavated objects and devalue others.⁶⁵ Objects of 'no museum value' remained at excavation sites in storage.⁶⁶ Sometimes, too, those objects were simply reburied. After the Second World War (and after, therefore, Reisner's death), the rump team of the HU-MFA Expedition spent time 'opening storage boxes in the magazines' at Giza. 'Some objects', Der Manuelian relates, 'dated to seasons as early as 1905, and identifying information had sadly long since disintegrated'. Then Director General of the Egyptian Antiquities Service Étienne 'Drioton agreed with [Dows] Dunham's strategy to separate what Boston might want, what he thought

Cairo might want, and then bury the remaining objects'.⁶⁷ Archaeologists and Egyptologists created the value that they wanted to see. There is therefore a real, undiscussed question here about the consequences of such decisions, not least in terms of the sort of knowledge that those disciplines can discuss today, but also what that limitation means in terms of wider scholarly and public relevance.

What is missing from Der Manuelian's analysis, too, is again the question about the historical stakes of this process. Why did institutions want to collect (some) Egyptian objects? What constituted a 'total' collection for them?⁶⁸ What aesthetic or scholarly shifts are at play here? By the early twentieth century, North American institutions, previously much more interested in Assyriology due to its connections to biblical research, had started to become much keener on work in Egypt (itself still connected to interest in the bible).⁶⁹ Reisner's career – and life spent excavating 'museum quality' Egyptian objects – reflects that shift. Yet apart from a brief note that Reisner 'started his career with Semitic philology, but the biblical connection seems to have played no role in his research strategy', this wider intellectual context goes unexamined.⁷⁰ Whether important to Reisner or not, this omission is a genuine shame, because what we are left with is a decontextualised account of why North American institutions became so rapaciously interested in Egypt. The lack of intellectual context makes it harder to parse how such extractive practice became so commonplace. Consequently, it is harder to understand what the value of these objects to certain institutions is now, let alone how to evaluate the claims those institutions make about caring for them.

This book is, after all, one about claims: those of a discipline and its historical claims to science and rigour, in addition, ultimately, to what the very diverse 'field' of Egyptology might be about.⁷¹ It is unfortunate, then, that at least some of the perspective provided by historical work – and the history of science in particular – is missing: Reisner's scientific knowledge is not discussed as inherently social and political, but instead separated out from those factors. What *Walking Among Pharaohs* reveals, however, is the extent to which Reisner's career and practices depended on – and built – the social, political, and intellectual conditions within which he moved. Why try and excuse this point?

In the last few years, the field of Egyptology has attempted to come to terms with its history: in the period surrounding 2022, Egyptologists marked the hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun and the 200th anniversary of Champollion's *Lettre à M. Dacier* with some degree of introspection. They did not unsettle, however, the

⁵⁷ See e.g. Der Manuelian 2023: 312 for Reisner's estimates of the financial value of the Giza 'reserve heads'.

⁵⁸ Der Manuelian 2023: 832.

⁵⁹ Der Manuelian 2023: 167.

⁶⁰ Der Manuelian 2023: 349.

⁶¹ Der Manuelian 2023: 350.

⁶² Der Manuelian 2023: 350.

⁶³ Der Manuelian 2023: 349.

⁶⁴ Der Manuelian 2023: 670 uses this example to highlight Smith's foresight. It is more realistically an example of the fact that such ethical questions have always existed but have consistently been sidelined.

⁶⁵ A point made clear in e.g. Carruthers 2022: 122–123; Stevenson 2014; Stevenson 2019: 156.

⁶⁶ Der Manuelian 2023: 486, quoting Reisner.

⁶⁷ Der Manuelian 2023: 807.

⁶⁸ References to the creation of complete, distinguished, or representative Egyptian collections – whether for teaching or museum display – occur throughout Der Manuelian 2023. See e.g. pp. 184, 191, 232, 235, 349, 352, 358, 378, 512, 654, 812.

⁶⁹ Kuklick 1996: 103.

⁷⁰ Der Manuelian 2023: 6.

⁷¹ I have used the term Egyptology as a shorthand throughout this piece. The term, however, is often what its protagonists make of it.

foundational nature of those acts in the discipline's accounts of itself: 'colonialism' became a major topic of conversation, but often in a way that recentred the Egyptological events central to it.⁷² In the same way, *Walking Among Pharaohs* can't quite bear to displace the hero at the centre of its story, or consider the lingering effects of some of his practices and the implications of writing great man (quasi-pharaonic) history. Sooner or later, though, such tensions will come undone. There are other narratives here, waiting to be written, and old practices and knowledge claims waiting to be untold.

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⁷² There were numerous exhibitions based on these historical events, which in turn inevitably centred them. See e.g. Andreu-Lanoë, et al. 2022; Parkinson 2022. An obvious question relating to this catch-22 situation is whether the history of Egyptology can ever be written without recentring such historical moments? What would a decentred 'history of Egyptology' look like? The same question is of course true of any study in the broader 'history of science': the frame of study centres the topic the study aims to question.

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