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**Book review:**

**Kamil, Jill. *Aswan and Abu Simbel: History and Guide*. Cairo: University of Cairo Press, 1993.**

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policy-makers were limited to act accordingly since there were many institutional imperatives of the Egyptian state, even though they themselves might have raised voices while they were in opposition.

However, the Palestine revolt of 1936-1939 came to change the situation and functioned as a crucial catalyst in reorienting Egyptian foreign policy towards active involvement in regional Arab politics. The formation of the Arab League between 1943-45, in which Egypt played an important role, strengthened Egyptian Arab nationalism because Egypt, in the post-1945 period, played a leading role in the Arab politics. In the 1950s and 1960s, when Nasser came to play a central role in Pan-Arabist demands, he was at the same time an "heir" of the supra-Egyptian nationalism which he helped to move to a new level of prominence. He was not, as the authors note, the "progenitor" of Pan-Arabism (p. 219).

It will no doubt be interesting to read a third volume in this series, since several questions arise: How long did the Pan-Arab elements last? Egyptian nationalism? What was the nature of the Islamic revivalism of the 1970s-1990s in the shadow of the Islamic mood of 1930s? Egyptian nationalism retreating from emphasizing cultural, linguistic, and ethnic characters of the Egyptians? Is the Egyptian nationalism of the 1990s re-defining the Egyptian national identity by bringing up elements from the pre-1930 territorial nationalism?

To sum up, this is a very well written book, theoretically well-formed, with a distinguished conceptual clarity supported by empirical evidence. The book fully meets the demands of the editorial board of the Cambridge Middle East Studies series, in which this is the second: "to provide new and original interpretations offering an original approach along theoretical and empirical lines." The book shows the changing nature of nationalism in a context where political, economic, social, and cultural forces of Egypt, as well as in the international environment at times result in dramatic scenarios, both for those who are personally involved and want to direct or re-direct the course of the events, as well as for scholars who at a later stage try to reconstruct the events in order to give a fuller and more complex account of the historical path.

#### Notes

Gershoni, Israel & Jankowski, James P. 1986, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood, 1900-1930*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.



## Aswan and Abu Simbel: History and Guide

Jill Kamil

Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 1993, 159 pages. \$25 cloth (ISBN 977-424-321-8).

Review by

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Aswan and Abu Simbel are two of the most fascinating places on the earth. For centuries these two locales on Egypt's southern border have intrigued and mystified their visitors. Jill Kamil's work surveys the historical importance of these sites from ancient to modern times, with special attention to their economic and military significance for the ancient pharaohs. Kamil remarks:

Aswan provides...a framework within which ancient Egyptian relations with Egypt's southern neighbor may be seen. Although it was the central government's most distant province, it was more important to it than many other larger and nearer communities (pp. 6-7).

Yet Aswan is not merely a historical relic on Egypt's southern border. Kamil clarifies:

...what once was a departure point for the world's earliest known explorers into Africa has today become a university town that attracts large numbers of African students into Egypt (p. 3).



Nevertheless, despite the changes brought on by technological advancement and increasing contact with the West, much of Aswan has remained pristine from modernity. It is this paradoxical Aswan, in which antiquity and modernity coexist, which Kamil portrays in this book.

Kamil treats the subject telescopically beginning with a general historical overview of Aswan (including Elephantine and Kom Ombo) and Abu Simbel and narrowing the focus topically with each successive chapter. Kamil begins by providing a brief history of the area beginning with the prehistorical contacts between the early Egyptians and their neighbors to the south, the Nubians. She takes us through the colonization of Nubia after the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, the establishment of garrisons, trade mechanisms, and political representatives in ancient Nubia, and the eventual destruction and neglect of the area under Hyksos rule (1786-1567 BCE). This section also guides us through selective moments of Greek and Roman domination while commenting upon the oscillating periods of support and neglect. Kamil concludes her introduction with an overview of the Arab conquest and a brief discussion of modern events that have had an impact on the area, such as the building of the Aswan Dam.

Kamil then focuses on the prominent tourist sites at Aswan and Elephantine, including the temples of Khnum and Satis, the sanctuary of Heqaib (a site seldom discussed in tourist guides), and the Elephantine Museum. Kamil places special emphasis here on the historical importance of the Nile to this region and to the significance and use of Nilometers.

From here Kamil turns to the island of Philae and the worship of Isis. Outlined are the religious rituals once practiced there, the temple of Isis and its importance as the "last outpost of paganism in Egypt" (p. 63), Hadrian's Arch, the temples of Harendotus and Hathor, and the Kiosk of Trajan. Also discussed is the discovery of an obelisk at Philae that further aided Jean Francois Champollion in his initial decipherment of hieroglyphic Egyptian in 1822.

Kamil also presents an overview of the environs of Aswan, aside from Elephantine, including Qubbet al-Hawa, the tombs of various nobles (e.g., Sirenput I, Mekhu, Sabni.), the Monastery of Saint Simeon, the Mausoleum of Aga Khan III, the ancient pharonic granite quarries, the Fatimid Cemetery, the Nubia Museum, and Plantation Island. Surveyed also are the Aswan High Dam, its monument, and New Kalabsha including the temple of Kalabsha, Beit al-Wali, the Kiosk of Kertassi, and the prehistoric petroglyphs in that region (another seldom mentioned point of interest).



Also discussed are the temples of Ramses II and his Queen Nefertari at Abu Simbel. In this section Kamil provides background information on Ramses II and his wife as well as on the events that led up to the 1962 UNESCO effort to save his monuments from the inundation of the Nile caused by the construction of the Aswan Dam.

Kamil then takes us to the double temples of Sobek and Horus at Kom Ombo, to the camel market at Daraw, and to the settlement of Nubians in New Nubia on the eastern side of the Nile Valley.

The book concludes with the more practical information, such as how to get to Aswan and Abu Simbel, what the weather is like, available hotel accommodation, notable bazaars and restaurants, and tourist information stations.

Although stocked with historical data, this book is aimed at the non-historian, as its lack of notes attests. Having compiled information on Egyptian history for the Discovery Channel's recent CD ROM on the subject, this reviewer is well-acquainted with the difficulties involved with providing this often complex and obscure information to non-scholars. In this regard, this work must be considered a success. It is concise, easy to read, and well supplemented with maps and photos.

On the other hand, several aspects of this book deter readership quite significantly and deserve comment here. For example, despite the subtitle of this book which suggests itself as a "history," the book is, more accurately speaking, an "apocoped history," and an extremely selective one at that. While certain historical periods and rulers are given ample space (e.g., the New Kingdom and Ramses II), others receive scant coverage. For example, Kamil mentions Pharaoh Akhenaton's relations with Nubia in two passing sentences (p. 16). Certainly, this famous ruler, who had such an influential impact on Egyptian religion, no matter how brief, deserves greater attention.

Similarly, except for the construction of the Aswan Dam and the UNESCO efforts to save Aswan's monuments, references to the culture and modern historical events in Aswan are extremely sparse. One would like to hear more, for example, about the modern inhabitants, their society, and their culture (e.g., the Nubian population of Aswan's environs). The lack of balance makes the book appear like a tendentiously selective brochure for tourists.

Moreover, in this reviewer's opinion, the book's use as a "guide," again suggested by the subtitle of the book, is even more limited. While its size is convenient for travel and while it does contain some important contact information, its organization is not conducive to easy reference. In addition, the practical information in the concluding



chapter is only partially useful since it is incomplete. It lacks, for example, other essential tourist information such as phone numbers and addresses, detailed maps (the maps of tombs are crudely sketched [e.g., pp. 85, 87, 114, 123]), time tables, where to get train tickets. Indeed, with few exceptions (e.g., the sanctuary of Heqaib and the petroglyphs of Aswan's environs), one wonders whether the same information cannot be found elsewhere more accessibly.

Moreover, while Kamil provides a basic Egyptian chronology (though unfortunately only of historical periods and not of pharaohs [pp. 150-151]), select bibliography, and topical index, one also would like to see this guide equipped with a glossary of terms for the non-initiate, for whom this book was intended. This would aid the reader who often finds in the book unexplained terms, such as *ba*-bird (p. 74), Bes (p. 74), Rosetta Stone (p. 77), and others. It undoubtedly would satisfy the non-scholar's curiosity if the author supplied a pictorial list of ancient Egyptian deities as well.

There also are contextual and editorial infelicities. At times Kamil provides information which lacks the necessary referents. For instance, she informs us that "Egypt was finally liberated from Assyrian domination by Psamtik, an Egyptian from the Delta city of Sais" (p. 18), but Kamil has not told us of any Assyrian domination to this point, much less who the Assyrians were, but rather only of their 671 BCE march on the Delta.

Likewise, it is only in chapter two that we are told that Aswan's ancient name was Syene, though previously it is given without explanation (pp. 22-23); and though Kamil notes that the emblem of Elephantine was an elephant (*abu* in Egyptian, [p. 33]), we never are told that the ancient name of Elephantine (*Ayeb/Yeb*) means "Elephant."

Moreover, though typographical errors inevitably creep into any manuscript, one wonders how some of them could have escaped the editor's scrutiny. One example will suffice. On page 23, Kamil lists places in Egypt where Romans placed garrisons. One of them is listed as "Babylon (Old Cairo)," which I imagine should read "Fustat (Old Cairo)."

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this book, and these comments are directed at the publisher and not the author, is its extremely fragile binding. Virtually every page I turned came apart from the book upon the first reading. This is regrettable and certainly works against the book's marketability. In addition, some of the photographic and artistic representations are poorly reproduced. They are often overexposed (e.g., pp. 82, 91, 95) or very blurry (e.g., pp. 36, 42, 45, 75).



Despite the book's shortcomings, there are periodic pearls of information such as Kamil's retelling of a popular local story at Philae (pp. 78-79) about a man named Anas al-Wugud who, in an effort to be united with his beloved Zahr al-Ward, crossed a dangerous river on the back of a crocodile. As luck would have it, Zahr al-Ward, who was locked in a castle tower by her disapproving father, simultaneously escaped with a boat which took her to the middle of the river where she was united with her lover. As Kamil correctly notes (p. 79), the story, which has delighted the locals for centuries, is a transformed version of the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis whose temple and worship were located at Philae. Interestingly, the Hadrian gateway depicts Osiris as standing on the back of a crocodile en route to a castle-like Greco-Roman temple. Periodic references to local tradition, such as this, are not only enjoyable to read, but they underscore the historical continuity of Aswan's culture. One would like to see more of them.

In sum, while there are some kernels of interest contained in this work, the overall format, overly selective historical data, and general sparsity of necessary tourist information neither serve well as a history nor as a guide to some of the most interesting and beautiful regions in Egypt.

### Notes

1. Discovery Channel CD ROM for Windows: *Nile: Passage to Egypt*.
2. See, e.g., the extremely fine *Baedeker's Egypt* (Prentice Hall, 1994), which is only slightly larger, yet contains all the information in Kamil's work plus fine maps, illustrations, and important contact information.
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