Egyptian archaeologists increasingly engage with wider agendas in archaeology, beyond the traditional focus of their discipline on inscribed monuments and cultural history. Material culture is used to explore ancient Egyptian landscapes, social organisation and local life in archaeological contexts in which written and visual evidence is often sparse or, in fact, absent. The three books reviewed here contribute to this development. They will be of interest to Egyptologists as well as to a broader community of archaeologists and historians.

N. Moeller and A.K. Hodgkinson have extended their PhD theses into books both dealing with questions of urbanism in ancient Egypt. Today, very few archaeologists would subscribe to J. Wilson’s interpretation of Egypt as a “civilization without cities” (1960), not least because of the ongoing discovery of towns and cities in Egypt. The nature of urbanism in North-eastern Africa is, however, still a matter of much debate. The volume edited by P.P. Creasman and R. Wilkinson addresses Egypt’s interaction with its neighbours. It assembles contributions from archaeology, philology and geology. All three books are a stimulating read.

In The archaeology of urbanism in ancient Egypt, N. Moeller offers a most welcome up-to-date overview of Egyptian settlements from late prehistory up to the Middle Bronze Age, c. 3500–1700 BC. The author develops a settlement typology for the Pharaonic period and discusses the layout of selected houses. While Moeller includes associated objects in her analysis, she places a focus on the architecture of houses and towns, partially a legacy of historical excavations that have neglected the systematic recording of finds. The wealth of images and maps will make the book a standard reference for future discussions of Egyptian settlements.

Moeller departs from wider debates of urbanism in archaeology. Due to the difficulties that archaeologists from outside Egyptology have with the Egyptian material, according to Moeller, her aim is to outline source-critically the extant evidence in a diachronic order. Ultimately, her interest remains with the primary data, including in the final chapter. The comparison with Mesopotamia, presented as a first foray into cross-cultural perspectives, focuses on the architecture of excavated settlements. As a result, the book seems to make a stronger contribution to settlement archaeology than to discussions of urbanism.

In various chapters of the book, and forcefully in the conclusion, the author stresses that Egypt in the Old and Middle Kingdom was clearly urban. This is certainly true when the evidence is viewed from the south. On the African continent, Egypt is an urban exception until long after the Middle Bronze Age. Yet, the eccentric over-representation of state-planned

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settlements in the archaeological record of this period—in the form of campsites, pyramid towns and fortresses—can be seen as undermining this assumption. One could speculate that the lack of an urban infrastructure prompted settlement planning by central administration and that Egypt became urban only in the Late Bronze Age. B. Kemp (2013) has argued that even in this period, cities essentially were clusters of villages.

The diachronic arrangement of the evidence in the book raises questions about the dynamics and slow pace of urban growth in the first 1500 years of Pharaonic history. Moeller rightly argues that many state-planned settlements, which served the purpose of the crown, ceased to exist when central administration broke down, whereas provincial towns flourished in the First Intermediate Period (c. 2200–2050 BC) when the Egyptian state collapsed and local governors took over political control. To extend Moeller’s argument a little, the Pharaonic state seems to have fostered urban growth, but was itself unable to build functioning and sustainable cities. The relationship between state and urbanism may be even more complex. Some of the short-lived state-planned settlements, such as at Tell el-Dabba in the Delta, provided an urban infrastructure in the long run. In contrast, provincial towns grew as an unintended corollary of the appointment by central administration of local governors in the hinterland. From the Middle Kingdom onwards, towns and cities feature more prominently in administrative documents than they did before. The reasons for changes in Egyptian urbanism probably need to be sought in the nature and history of the Egyptian state and the various local responses to it.

One starts wondering what the relevance of urbanism in the social and cultural fabric of ancient Egypt was after all; for example, what role it played for the display and performance of Egyptian elites, how it affected political organisation, and why it mattered rather little in the way in which the ancient Egyptians imagined their country. The question to ask is perhaps not only whether but how Egypt was urban in the Old and Middle Kingdom compared to later periods or other societies. Whichever direction future discussions will take, Moeller has laid an excellent foundation to address this and other questions.

As in other archaeological disciplines, computational and scientific analyses have held sway in Egyptian archaeology. In *Technology and urbanism in Late Bronze Age Egypt*, Hodgkinson combines historical excavation records with fresh fieldwork data to map archaeological evidence of technological production using GIS software. She establishes distribution patterns of objects used for the production and processing of glass, faience, metal, textiles and stone sculpture within several royal settlements of the eighteenth dynasty (c. 1550–1300 BC): the capital of Akhenaton Amarna, the harbour and palace city of Gurob, and the palace complex at Malkata, at which the available data were too poorly documented to allow for statistical analysis. The rich evidence of craft and production activities at Pi-Ramesse, the capital of the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties (c. 1300–1070 BC), is considered in the discussion. Different from site-based accounts of workshops and production areas, the book investigates patterns of urban technology across sites, and, for this reason, has good potential to speak to an interdisciplinary readership.

Hodgkinson reviews a range of discussions on urbanism, technology and spatial analysis in urban archaeology within the Introduction. The chapters that follow have a strong analytical gist and focus heavily on the Egyptian case studies. The most substantial chapter, over a third of the entire book, is dedicated to Amarna. The author shows that crafts were more diverse in the city centre, where royal sculpture and glass were produced, than in some of the suburbs, and that not all smaller households specialised in a single technology. In the final chapter, Hodgkinson concludes with a set of graphs describing different patterns of access to raw materials and the control and distribution of finished goods according to material and technology. To present these results more efficiently, the book might have benefited from a stronger integration of literature review and analysis, and from a clearer outline of different scenarios against which the analysis is set. For example, one could ask whether the cities of the New Kingdom were agricultural towns or urban factories organised into neighbourhoods, as suggested in the research literature.

It would be interesting to discuss in greater depth what is specifically urban about the technologies considered in the book. The archaeological approach of the author is clearly original compared to traditional Egyptological studies of technology that rely predominantly on depictions of craft and production activities on tomb walls of high-ranking...
state officials. The comparison with the visual material poses an interesting question, however. It is not always clear where the craft activities depicted were carried out in reality, whether in villages, urban neighbourhoods or royal workshops. This is where the archaeological approach adopted by the author could play to its strength.

Pharaoh’s land and beyond: ancient Egypt and its neighbors, edited by P.P. Creasman and R.H. Wilkinson, is written for a broader readership. Yet since the 18 authors are specialists in their fields, the book is also a valuable resource for teaching and research. References are avoided within the chapters, presumably so as not to put off enthusiasts, but substantial bibliographies are included at the end of the volume. The book has five sections, dealing with: I) the physical routes connecting Egypt with her neighbours; II) social interaction; III) objects moving between Egypt and other countries; IV) the exchange of ideas on the level of technology, language and religion; and finally, (V) geological and biological phenomena shared across North-eastern Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. The contributions vary in scope and ambition, but most are descriptive. Some of the chapters, such as the mapping of land and maritime routes, geological hazards and the behaviour of the River Nile, refreshingly pick up themes from the recent research literature. For a better orientation in space and time, a map with all sites discussed in the volume and a comparative chronological chart would have been useful additions.

Only a few authors outline a theoretical context for the discussion of cultural exchange, namely S.T. Smith on cultural entanglement, B. Bader on culture-history and I. Shaw on diffusionism. These authors have published along similar lines elsewhere, and the short introduction to the basics of theory makes an interesting opening for their chapters. Of course, not all theory makes for good arguments, and historical context is often key for interpreting the evidence. A lay readership might, however, be interested in some of the general assumptions underpinning the volume, and this is certainly true for archaeologists and historians of neighbouring disciplines.

The editors remark that the ancient Egyptians had an Egyptocentric worldview, and that the volume is designed to showcase the more diverse nature of Egyptian culture and society. In this regard the book serves its purpose very well. Yet the reader seems to learn in the first place about Egypt and how it resonates in societies outside Egypt. To some extent, the volume therefore replicates the Egyptocentric perspective that it set out to challenge. Alternatively, one could attempt to situate Egypt within a much broader ancient world. Contexts that may be suggested for such an inquiry would include, for example, M. Feldman’s ‘international style’, which reflects the emergence of a community of royal courts in the Late Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean world (briefly referred to by S.T. Smith), world systems theory in the aftermath of A. Sherratt, the African origins of Egypt and their alleged bearing on the rise of ancient Europe, and the social implications of cultural memory. These themes have received limited attention in Egyptology, and could have been used in the volume as an additional springboard to set ancient Egypt in a global perspective.

The books reviewed here reflect recent advances in archaeological approaches to Pharaonic Egypt by a younger generation of archaeologists, and offer a well-rounded panorama of Egypt’s place in the ancient world. It is encouraging to find discussions of broader concern in all three of them. Perhaps there is a greater reluctance in Egyptian archaeology than in other disciplines to use theories and models developed in a different empirical and historical context for an explanation of the Egyptian evidence, but reconciling details in the primary data with relevant models is a challenge not confined to the study of ancient Egypt. While bottom-up research remains successful in Egyptian archaeology, as the books reviewed are showing, it can possibly be combined with some more top-down approaches to stimulate discussions. In this sense, the three volumes might be described as looking out of ancient Egypt from within.

References


Manfred Bietak, Ernst Czerny, Irene Forstner-muller. Das vorliegende Buch enthalt Artikel, die auf Vortragen eines Kongresses zur Stadtentwicklung im Alten Agypten beruhen, der im November 2006 an der OAW stattgefunden hat. Innerhalb dieses vorgegebenen Rahmens umspannen die Artikel ein thematisch und chronologisch sehr weites Feld. Von ganz unterschiedlichen Seiten werden verschiedene Aspekte der Stadtentwicklung beleuchtet. Die Struktur einzelner Gebäudetypen (F. Doyen, S. Hendrickx) sowie die raumliche (E. Czerny, I. Forstner-Muller, M. Lehner) und soziale (M. Bietak, K. Spence) Organisatio...