



Ancient Lives: The Story of the Pharaohs' Tombmakers

John Romer

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One of the best-known historians working today, and a world-renowned expert on the ancient world, presents a brilliant account of the lives of the stonemasons, scribes, and painters who created some of Egypt's finest treasures. Illustrated with both color photos and black-and-white drawings, this groundbreaking study goes back more than 3,000 years to a village where the workers who created the tombs of the Pharaohs and the Valley of the Kings resided. "John Romer is an archeologist with a genius for raising the busy ghosts of ancient Egypt."--*Sunday Times*

Ancient Lives: The Story of the Pharaohs' Tombmakers Details

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From Reader Review Ancient Lives: The Story of the Pharaohs' Tombmakers for online ebook

Mel says

This book really brings home the wonder that is Egyptology. It is amazing that to see that such detail can be known about a community that lived over 3000 years ago. The book traces the village, and the villagers, that made the tombs of the pharaohs. It looks at their lives, their labour and their conflicts with each other and the government. I think this book was written for people who have a greater knowledge of Egypt than I do. References were made to different Pharaohs, without saying what the year in BCE was, or how much time had passed between chapters. The book followed the lives of the important people of the village, their rise to fame, and sometimes their falls from grace. I could have done with more information about the women in the village. The book focused almost entirely on the men. There was one very touching poem written by a man mourning his lost wife. But on the whole the women were hardly mentioned at all. I think the last part of the book was the most interesting to me. Egypt had fallen on hard times and could no longer afford to pay its artisans and so the people who were paid to create the tombs ended up robbing them, in quite a clever way so the government took a couple decades to notice. The last chapter looked at the work of 2 centuries of Egyptologists that helped to uncover the story of the village. This book is definitely a good companion to other histories of Egypt and I'd definitely recommend it to anyone interested in the time and their monuments.

Jess Erin says

Great book! I couldn't put it down!

Elli says

Imagine piecing together the story of the very ordinary craftsmen, scribes and artists behind the grand tombs of Ancient Egypt based on bits on ostraca? This is what archaeologists painstakingly did, generation over generation for the workers at the ancient Place of Truth. An amazing story!

James Mietus says

This is a wonderful study of the well-preserved archaeological record of Deir el-Medina, a New Kingdom village housing the builders of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. This village was unique in Egypt in that its inhabitants were mostly literate and moderately wealthy on account of their trade. Nevertheless, from the record of their lives we can extrapolate much about ancient Egyptian society. John Romer does an excellent job at presenting this wealth of evidence while maintaining a riveting narrative told through the experiences of the foremen and scribes.

I had the great fortune of visiting Deir el-Medina in 2011, and this book is invaluable in understanding the

story this site has to tell.

Jan-Maat says

[of the French Archaeological Institute of Cairo (hide spoiler)]

Brendan Coster says

A very good read. In view of many "day in the lives" books that often fail -- sometimes just be lack of data -- this one takes you through lives of people in the village of the tomb makers. Not just data, and writings, but we have artifacts from the people you read about and the tombs they built for themselves..

Marianna says

Very interesting topic but the way it is written makes it boring.

Phyl says

If you've ever seen the television documentary, "Ancient Lives," you will know how thrilled I was to find the book upon which it was based, by John Romer.

Romer traces several hundred years of the history of a village now called Deir el Medine, which was located just over a ridge from the Valley of the Kings in ancient Egypt, on the west bank of the Nile from Thebes. There were no natural sources of food or even water nearby, so all its provisions were supplied by the Royal Vizier or the Priests of Amun at the temples across the river, because the sole purpose for its existence was to house the families who excavated, carved, and painted the tombs of the Pharaohs.

The village scribes kept meticulous records of tomb work, tools and supplies, who worked in which gangs (excavating, drafting, or painting), delivery of provisions, and even who accused whom of what in village disputes. Many records were found in offices right in the village, or sealed caches in the homes of later generations that moved down to the west bank of the Nile.

Therefore Romer can escort us through generations of several families, showing how they lived their daily lives, developed their skills, and passed on the creative torch to their sons. He correlates village history with historical events, demonstrating how the abandonment of the capital city by the Pharaohs (even though the city itself remained inhabited) affected provisions, government, and even policing of the area. We follow the main genealogical lines through prosperous times, through a long-standing feud between two families, strikes and periods of uncertain provisioning, a spell of starvation, lawlessness and tomb-robbing, and finally into a last renaissance before the village was abandoned after several hundred years of habitation.

We learn that Scribe Kenhirkhopeshef (who kept lists of dream interpretations and health spells as well as legal records) had a distinctive handwriting style, while a later scribe, Djutmose, had considerable authority

in the government of Thebes, and was constantly feeling under the weather.

We also become familiar with craftsmen and painters of exquisite skill, whose characteristic styles can be discerned in specific tombs over the centuries.

Those who saw the TV series will remember John Romer standing in front of tomb paintings, tracing lines and colours with gentle fingers, waxing poetic as he spoke of the style and beauty of the work. Or walking up the main village street, describing the evening feasts of the villagers as though they were distant cousins, who lived a full, vital, happy life only the day before yesterday. He spoke every name with lyrical affection.

Reading this book, which came before and inspired the TV series, we discover where this poetic lyricism came from. Dry words on paper spring to life, and we can hear Romer's soft voice, fondly bringing to life each villager's individual character, skills, and aspirations. We learn to love the people and their history almost as much as he does. And when the site is finally abandoned, its last inhabitants carting their worldly possessions on mules down to the new settlement on the west bank, we are the last to leave, casting reluctant glances over our shoulders as we climb the pass and at last lose sight of the place.

Fortunately, thanks to the archaeological work of a few scholars in the late 19th and 20th centuries -- and thanks most of all to Romer's loving exposition in the 1980s -- we are allowed to return again, and three hundred years of villagers resurrect before our eyes, living and loving, and creating their sacred masterpieces in the Valley of the Kings.

Simon Binning says

This is an excellent book. John Romer tells the story of the village inhabited by the craftsmen who created the tombs in the valley of the kings. We have a surprisingly large amount of archeological evidence for their activities because, being central to the Egyptian state, the village was largely run by dedicated scribes who noted everything down. Through the quirks of history, many of these records have survived and been excavated, and give us a fascinating insight into nearly 300 years of the villages history. As the author points out, we know more about the inhabitants than we do about most of the Pharaohs from the same time period, and certainly we have a much more personal history - names, family relationships, disputes, legal records and so on - and you do get a feel for the ups and downs of the village, coinciding with Egypt's rises and falls. The story is told in a straightforward, chronological manner, with plenty of detail, and frequent quotes from the documents; you do feel you get to know some of the main characters. There is a lot of information about the construction and decoration of the tombs - and what an uncertain business it was, for if a Pharaoh didn't rule very long (which many did not), then his tomb was simply not ready, so he would be buried in whatever had been finished, and sealed up.

The book accompanied a TV series (which I am old enough to vaguely remember) and has a number of good photos and line drawings. If you want to get a feel for what life was like in ancient Egypt - albeit in an atypical village - then this is definitely worth reading.

James F says

The American subtitle is somewhat misleading; the original British subtitle, "The Story of the Pharaoh's

"Tombmakers" gives a better idea of what the book is about. It is a history of one atypical village -- the village of the workmen in "The Great Place", better known today as the Valley of the Kings -- over the last three centuries of the New Kingdom, from the reign of Horemheb to the end of the Ramesside period and the first few ruling High Priests.

Because of the discovery of local archives, this is probably the best documented community in antiquity; Romer traces the families of scribes and foremen over the entire period, with their marriages and feuds, as well as the work they did on the tombs of the Pharaohs and their relations. I read two other books on the Valley of Kings (one by Romer, and one by Wilkinson) some seven or eight years ago; this book covers the same material from a different perspective, that of the workmen who dug and decorated the tombs. There is a short epilog on the discovery of the archives and the excavation of the site. It was a very interesting book.

Nancy Hartwell says

I am an amateur Egyptologist -- I just gave away 88 books on ancient Egypt -- and this is by far my favorite. Not only does it dazzle you with pictures of amazing artwork, but it makes the people come alive. I howled with delight at "misspellings" in hieroglyphs, learned to recognize the loopy handwriting of Scribe Kenhophapeshef, laughed at a couple making love and they fall out of bed, felt my heart grow warm as a generous citizen is described, chuckled at an excerpt from a letter more than 3,000 years old where the father is chastising his son for giving cloth to his girlfriend instead of his mother as had been instructed...

Love love love this book.

Nick Van der Graaf says

An absolutely fascinating study of a village of craftsmen and artists who built many of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings.

It reveals a million interesting details about the lives of ordinary people in the ancient world - their cuisine, their artefacts, their clothes, their struggles to achieve their own kind of greatness.

It also reads like an ancient Peyton Place. There were enough literate people around to have left us detailed records of their jealousies, crimes, workers' strikes, even illicit affairs.

Through such a wealth of detail, and through direct translations of the scribes' own notes, Romer brings the past alive in a way that seems shockingly familiar. Readers will be taken straight back 3200 years and meet policemen, artists, sailors, thieves, wives, soldiers, priests and lovers. All very real, no longer stiff, two dimensional, dusty figures on pots and scrolls, but our brothers and sisters, in the flesh, with all their human beauty and faults.

Nota Bene. This book is for the serious adult reader. The illustrations are minimal and there are 250 pages of densely-packed text without a break. This is a terrific book, but I wouldn't recommend it for younger readers.

I look forward to seeing the television series based on this. But don't use it to skip the book; you will be missing out on a real treasure.

Margaret Sankey says

Using archeological remains and governmental records, Romer reconstructs the working world of the crews who built the pyramids--generation spanning construction projects which spawned "worker villages" of hierarchically jostling supervisors, craftsmen, grunt labor and their families, with all the attendant conflicts and material remains in the trash.

Sarahandus says

This book is told like the reports of a small village down the road. It is a diary of generations of the tomb builders lives and times, giving one a new look at how Egypt worked or sometimes didn't work, in those days.

I found trying to imagine how their monetary system worked, getting paid in grain or kind and not coinage baffling.

John Romer makes those people come alive.

A really fascinating book.

Lee says

I am not the all-knower about things Egyptological, but this is one of my favorite books about pharaonic Egypt. With source material as rich and complex and fascinating as this, it remains an utter mystery to me how the Stone of Light books (which draw on the same village of tomb-builders) turned out so two-dimensional.
