

**History and Narrative in a Changing Society:  
James Henry Breasted and the Writing of Ancient Egyptian History in Early  
Twentieth Century America**

by

**Lindsay J. Ambridge**

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**Doctoral Committee:**

**Associate Professor Janet E. Richards, Chair  
Professor Carla M. Sinopoli  
Associate Professor Terry G. Wilfong  
Emily Teeter, Oriental Institute, University of Chicago**

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## List of Abbreviations

- AT* Breasted, James Henry. 1916. *Ancient Times, a History of the Early World: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient History and the Career of Early Man*. Boston: Ginn and Company.
- DC* Breasted, James Henry. 1934. *The Dawn of Conscience*. New York: Scribner.
- DRT* Breasted, James Henry. 1912. *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*. New York: Scribner.
- HE* Breasted, James Henry. 1905. *A History of Egypt from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*. New York: Scribner.
- Pioneer* Breasted, Charles. 1943. *Pioneer to the Past: The Story of James Henry Breasted, Archaeologist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## Introduction

This study is a critical analysis of the foundational historiography of ancient Egypt; specifically, a segment of that scholarship produced in late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. This seemingly broad topic is narrowed when we consider that at this time, Egyptology barely had a foothold in *American* academia. Were the region and scholastic output under consideration German, or British, the number of scholars and institutions to review, as well as their historical forbearers, would be greater. For example, the German Archaeological Institute was founded as early as 1829, and Egyptology was already being formally taught in Germany by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Karl Richard Lepsius had accepted an appointment as Professor of Egyptology at Berlin University in 1846). Established in Britain in 1882, the Egypt Exploration Society (then known as the Egypt Exploration Fund) could draw on professional English Egyptologists such as Reginald Stuart Poole and W. M. Flinders Petrie, the latter beginning his tenure as the Edwards Professor of Egyptian Archaeology and Philology at University College London in 1892, having already been actively working in Egypt for the twelve years previous. In contrast, Egyptology in America was not yet academically formalized by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; James Henry Breasted, who eventually became the first American professor of Egyptology, had to pursue his graduate studies in Berlin (from 1891 to 1894) under the distinguished Orientalist Adolph Erman.

It is in Breasted that this study finds its focal point. He wrote not only prolifically, but widely (in terms of subject matter) and broadly (in terms of scope), during his thirty-year career. The subjects that he tackled spanned the gamut from

ancient religious thought and conscience to the precursors of Byzantine painting; his scope could be as minute and specialized as a densely annotated analysis of a single Egyptian papyrus<sup>1</sup> or as broad and cohesive as a historical synthesis of ancient Near Eastern civilization. There were other American Egyptologists of Breasted's generation, most notably George Reisner (who also received his academic training in Germany) and Herbert Winlock. However, it is Breasted who provides the fulcrum of this study, as a reference point from which to investigate the effects of political, cultural, and economic variables on historiography and more specifically on the historical narratives of ancient Egypt during his generation.

My aim is to establish the context in which he worked and, by extension, the context in which some of the foundational works of Egyptological scholarship were produced. This study then goes beyond establishing the political and cultural milieu to examining the roles it played in the interpretation of the ancient past. Some of these effects are overt; personal records and correspondence by Breasted and his contemporaries often make specific and unguarded reference to current events and how they were perceived at the time. Others are more subtle and nuanced, requiring the investigator to draw connections between the time and place of the historian and the history being written; to take seemingly disparate threads and bring them together into a coherent analysis. Above all, it requires a critical reading of a particular scholar's historical narratives with an ear attuned to language and interpretations that may have been influenced by several socio-political factors. In deconstructing Breasted's historical scholarship, it is my aim to discern the degree to which the social discourse of his era

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<sup>1</sup> The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus.

influenced the writing of ancient Egyptian history and the interpretation of Egyptian religion.

To this end, Chapter 1 establishes the parameters – the context – that defined and shaped Breasted's world, as well as the nascent field of American Egyptology, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the aim is to elucidate a specifically American trajectory of ancient Egyptian historiography – American in terms of its authors, audience, institutions, influences, and financial supporters – the full context requires an engagement with socio-political and cultural trends in western Europe and the Middle East. Chapter 2 takes the parameters discussed previously and reviews the role of such factors in historical theory and practice. Additionally, it examines the ways in which contemporary historians perceive and analyze previous historical scholarship in light of the socio-cultural variables that acted upon its authors. It is in subsequent chapters that I directly address specific historical works, moving from the contextual and theoretical framework already established to a critical reading of Breasted's most significant contributions to interpreting the ancient past.

At this point it is pertinent to ask why James Breasted should be the benchmark figure for examining the abovementioned issues. It is not simply because he was the country's first professor of Egyptology. There are three primary reasons for choosing this particular scholar and his output: 1) the specific political and cultural context(s) that formed the milieu of his academic pursuits; 2) the breadth of his written work – which encompasses a precision and specificity of vision for the future of History and Oriental Studies – and the opportunities it affords for an in-depth analysis of the influence of socio-political factors on historiography; and 3) his lasting legacy as a founding figure of

American Egyptology, combined with his efforts to popularize and disseminate his theories concerning the rise of early civilization and the centrality of ancient Egypt.

### **I. Egyptology in America: The Gilded Age to the Jazz Age**

The first of these three reasons encompasses the largest set of issues and corresponds to the core contextualization of late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century America that will be discussed thoroughly in Chapter 1. However, it is useful to outline the main issues here. Born in 1865 and active in academia from the late 1880s until his death in 1935, Breasted worked and wrote during a critical era in our modern history, or, it may be said, he looked at ancient Egypt through the lens of several critical moments in time. Thus, the first basis for his relevance to this study is the political upheaval and cultural change through which he lived and worked as well as the very specific circles – political, intellectual, and social – he inhabited. The first element that defined the context of turn of the century historians is the element most specific to Breasted himself: the nature of Egyptology, both as a discipline and as a phenomenon of popular culture, at this point in American history. This was a transitional period in America's engagement with ancient Egypt – it was the generation in which American Egyptology first became institutionalized and legitimized, and it was Breasted who stood at the forefront of this transition. As I will discuss in further detail below, he had an intimate view of the aspirations and machinations involved in the establishment and administration of academic departments and institutes. He experienced the inner workings of the Tutankhamen-inspired Egyptomania and its political fallout due to his assistance to Howard Carter's team. Moreover, Breasted encountered firsthand the difficulties of reconciling American and Egyptian interests and motives when he served as the

ambassador for Rockefeller's (failed) proposal to fund the construction of a new museum in Cairo.

The development of a nascent discipline, particularly as it found expression in America, is the innermost of the various spheres in which professional academics of this era found themselves. If we envision ever-widening circles of socio-political contexts radiating outward from a central figure - in this case, James Henry Breasted - we move in our analysis from the narrow to the broader context. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to envision horizontally overlapping circumstances, each influencing a specific aspect or element of an individual's creative or scientific work. In the case of Breasted and his generation, a pervasive social reality of mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century America was the influx of poor immigrants, rapid urban growth and industrialization, and the deterioration of some urban areas into slums. Having grown up in the small Midwestern town of Rockford, Illinois, Breasted spent his childhood relatively sheltered from the harsh conditions of urban poverty, but his adult professional life was played out in urban centers on both sides of the Atlantic. Berlin, the city in which he spent many of his intellectually and professionally formative years, was on the one hand the "leading industrial city of Europe. . . . The ultimate example of the progressive city" (Reader 2004: 147), while also a metropolis burgeoning with overcrowded slums and tenements (ibid.). It is perhaps significant that Chicago - the nexus of his professional life - underwent the most rapid population growth and industrialization of any Midwestern city, expanding from a town of 350 people in 1830 to a city of over 1 million by 1900 (Kotkin 2005: 91). Alongside urban expansion came the rise of capitalist dominance and the emergence of a powerful and influential American elite whose wealth was founded on

industry and business (see Chernow 1998; Trachtenberg 1982). That Breasted was not unaffected by the social and economic phenomena of America's Gilded Age is evidenced by his relationship with John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Their relationship was defined first and foremost by Rockefeller's patronage of both the Oriental Institute and Breasted personally, but they also maintained cordial personal relations until Breasted's death.<sup>2</sup>

Like many of his generation, Breasted was a witness to global political shifts. He saw, in the horrors of World War I, the devastating consequences of imperialism and modern warfare. Considering that he had been educated in Berlin and many of his closest colleagues and friends were, in fact, German, the war had profound personal and professional implications.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, he came of age in a colonial atmosphere but lived to see the beginnings of a postcolonial Middle East. His firsthand (and dangerous) experience with the chaotic post-War remnants of the regions once ruled by the Ottoman Empire – and with the attempts of foreign powers to fashion nations out of tribally-dominated areas – came from his reconnaissance expedition to the Middle East in 1919-1920 (documented in Breasted 1920; C. Breasted 1943; and Marcanti 1977).

In conjunction with the devastation of World War I, those that lived through it saw drastic changes in long-established social and political hierarchies: the shift from the German Empire of Kaiser Wilhelm II to the Weimar Republic; from the Ottoman rule of Mehmed VI to the Republic of Turkey; and from imperial to soviet Russia. This widespread collapse of imperial power was a defining aspect of an era in which scholars

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<sup>2</sup> The extent to which a "friendship" could be said to exist between men of vastly different social and economic status is discussed in further detail below.

<sup>3</sup> The effect of World War I on his personal and professional life is illuminated through his correspondence, large excerpts of which are contained in C. Breasted 1943 (hereafter abbreviated as *Pioneer*). This will be discussed in greater detail below.

were interpreting the vicissitudes of ancient Egypt's imperial history. It is necessary to consider the combined force of these early 20<sup>th</sup> century factors – war, dissolution of empire, emergent postcolonialism and Egyptian nationalism – when critically analyzing that century's narratives of ancient Egyptian political history.

## **II. The Breadth of a Scholar**

The complexities of this contextual framework necessitate further elaboration in an independent chapter, as it is the foundation for building a critical and structured analysis of the historiographical work produced within that framework. In contrast, the two additional reasons for selecting Breasted as the fulcrum of this study can be addressed with a greater degree of brevity. A concise review of Breasted's oeuvre illustrates its unmatched breadth and scope in terms of the time and place in which he was working. His publications can be categorized and examined according to genre, though this study does not attempt to examine every genre in which Breasted was active. For example, he produced a corpus of treatises on specialized subject matter – primarily philologically-based treatments of a particular historical problem – that contribute to his scholarly reputation but which are not the primary material under investigation here. Several of his earliest articles and books were of this nature: an analysis of Hebrew syntax in the Book of Daniel (Breasted 1891); several pieces on various aspects of Thutmose III's reign (Breasted 1899; 1900a; 1900b; 1901a); and frequent articles for periodicals dedicated to Biblical studies (e.g., Breasted 1893b; 1896; 1897; 1900c; 1901b; 1902). Insofar as specialist studies are concerned, there are two peaks in this segment of his body of work, the first occurring early in his career and the second toward



the close of his career: the 5-volume *Ancient Records of Egypt* (1906) and his 2-volume translation and analysis of the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus (1930).

Though these publications solidified his standing as an extremely capable philologist, it is his efforts in other genres that are critical to this study: first, the broad narratives of ancient Egyptian history and religious thought in which he synthesized vast amounts of information into interpretations of cultural change (and progress) over time for a popular audience; and secondly, his statements on the direction and development of the nascent field of Oriental Studies in America. The most significant books of the former category, and which will form the core of my critical and deconstructive analysis of early 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography, include *A History of Egypt* (1905), *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (1912), *Ancient Times: A History of the Early World* (1916) and *The Dawn of Conscience* (1934). In addition to being broadly conceived interpretive works, the publication dates of these four books span a critical time period in the early twentieth century, the cultural and political significance of which has been outlined above.

In a brief biographical outline of Breasted's personal and professional life, John Wilson assigned the first three of these books to Breasted's "period of interpretation" from 1905 to 1919 (Wilson 1936: 100-103). His research leading up to 1905 had been directed towards copying, collating, and translating all of the then-extant historical texts of ancient Egypt dating from the earliest examples to the Persian Period. This was a task of meticulous data-gathering, considering that the collation and translation of thousands of inscriptions is a process of generating historical data. One of the results was the

aforementioned *Ancient Records of Egypt*. It was this collection of texts that served as much of the source material for his first large-scale interpretive work, *A History of Egypt*.

Gathering copies of *in situ* inscriptions for *Ancient Records* was a grueling undertaking; as Wilson notes, “None of the new school was willing to take an old copy or an old translation at its face value. They wanted to make their own first-hand copies and translations. The notation ‘verified by my own collation’ was essential to the final study of any document” (Wilson 1936: 99). Consequently, Breasted organized epigraphic expeditions to Egypt in the 1905-06 and 1906-07 winter seasons (he published his reports in the *American Journal of Semitic Languages* in 1906 and 1908). His son Charles, present on the first expedition, later described the work as “a period of scientific drudgery” (*Pioneer* 163). Breasted and his assistant would venture into desert wadis photographing and copying inscriptions, enduring gnats and occasional sandstorms. When copying tomb and temple interiors, they bore the irritation of flapping bats ruining the photographic exposure. Fourteen consecutive days were spent copying an Abu Simbel temple inscription that totaled 328 feet of hieroglyphic text, for which the team had to devise a unique scaffold and reflector system to control the amount and quality of the sunlight hitting the inscription (Breasted 1906b: 10). Charles reports that to copy the final lines, his father was forced “to hang head-down, alternately holding a kerosene lamp at various angles to secure a reading, then entering the latter in his transcription” (*Pioneer* 167). The second expedition in 1906-07 went even further into inhospitable terrain such that Breasted left his family behind in Cairo. He and his small crew of two additional members – a photographer and draftsman (the latter was Norman de Garis Davies) – ventured into Upper Nubia, above the fifth cataract to the city of Meroë. Breasted’s daily

journal provides an amusing glimpse into the restrained tolerance with which he met the field conditions:

One of the joys of staying here is the dust, especially when there is a high wind at night. One wakes with his hair full, and clothing and papers deluged. It is inches deep on the floor of one's room. When the pillow falls off the end of one's headless cot in the night, and all clean pillowcases have been sent to the boat which we shall not reach for three weeks; or when toothbrushes or stockings drop into it, or the wind blows one's towel around in it half the night, one's temper becomes somewhat frayed. (*Pioneer* 179)

The results of these expeditions were added to the data he had already been gathering for almost a decade, since he first embarked in 1896 on what would seem an almost absurdly ambitious task: “collecting all the historical sources of ancient Egypt . . . wherever they existed in the world” (*Pioneer* 102). After years of copying inscriptions in the museums and private collections throughout Europe and America, the translations filled ten thousand manuscript pages (*ibid.*).

The logistical and physical demands of epigraphic fieldwork did not leave time for substantial interpretive work in the realm of intellectual or religious history as it pertained to the ancient Egyptians. Thus, the period between 1907 and 1918 was a fruitful era for Breasted to research and articulate his thoughts on these issues, as this era represents a hiatus between the exhausting fieldwork of the previous decade and what was to come in 1919: the founding of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago and all of the administrative duties associated with it. In fact, Breasted did not travel to Europe at all, nor to Egypt, during these years. As a result, it was the period in which he was able to turn his mind toward questions of historiography, philosophy, and religion in ancient civilizations. *A History of Egypt* was written concurrently with *Ancient Records* and though it is described as a high point in Breasted's skill with historical narrative, it

was the later *Development of Religion and Thought* and *Ancient Times* that illuminate his engagement with broader philosophical and religious concepts and his attempts to situate Egypt within the stream of humanity's "progress". *Development of Religion and Thought* was described by the archaeologist William F. Albright as "epoch-making" (Albright 1936: 3). It was these years of teaching, lecturing, and writing – bracketed between a period of intensive work abroad and heavy administrative duties later in his career – that afforded him sufficient professional security and relative comfort to pursue his agenda of placing ancient Egypt within the grand human scheme of things.

If these works illumine the trajectory of his ideas at mid-career, then *The Dawn of Conscience*, published just two years before his death, represents a final statement of his philosophy – "an important credo by a great humanist" (Wilson 1936: 104). The latter is a reworking of the earlier book on religion, and a useful bridge between them is a series of lectures, "The Origins of Civilization", published in three installments in 1919. Additionally, there are several short pieces from later in his career that concisely lay out his views on the place of the ancient Near East in the history of humanity: "The New Past" (1925), "The New Crusade" (1929), and "The Rise of Man" (1931). Thus, we can trace the developing meta-narrative of a seminal Egyptologist and historian from its origins in 1905 to its final form in 1934.

A second and related body of Breasted's written work is a component in analyzing the arc of his meta-narrative. Throughout his career, and particularly in the context of the early days of the Oriental Institute, Breasted wrote explicitly about his vision for the discipline of ancient history and Oriental Studies.<sup>4</sup> He published an

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<sup>4</sup> Breasted used terminology such as "Orient" and "Orientalist" to describe his discipline; a detailed analysis of early Egyptology as a part of Oriental Studies and the degree to which this could be considered

element of his nascent vision as early as 1893, when he was still a graduate student in Berlin. In a brief column from *The Biblical World* entitled “Scientific Egyptology”, he praises Adolph Erman (his then-advisor) for his meticulous and systematic approach to ancient languages. Breasted claims that *scientific* Egyptology requires linguistic precision in ancient Egyptian, mastery of Coptic, and a working knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic and Assyrian (Breasted 1893: 461). He lamented that “Older men look askance at his [Erman’s] results, and cling to their old, inexact methods. . . . By his efforts Egyptology has really become a science, and may now be studied from a philological point of view” (ibid.). The viewpoint expressed in this article reveals the influence of Erman on a young Breasted and sheds some light on Egyptology as an emerging academic discipline. Breasted would continue to prioritize philology as the foundation of Egyptology throughout his career, but his research was certainly not restricted to issues of grammar, syntax and translation, as the scope of his written work clearly indicates.<sup>5</sup> What is perhaps most illuminating in this very brief snippet from 1893 is a theme that will recur again and again throughout his writing: history as science.

There is a substantial body of material that lends itself to the study of Breasted’s objectives for shaping the field of Egyptology and, at a broader level, ancient history as a whole. He discussed his ambitions and purposes as a historian, an Orientalist, an educator, and as an American scholar in a number of diverse contexts: articles such as “The Place of the Near Orient in the Career of Man and the Task of the American

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an outdated paradigm will follow in subsequent chapters. I retain the term “Orient” and its derivatives in contexts that make reference, either explicitly or implicitly, to Breasted’s usage of it.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Breasted criticized what he perceived as the narrowly linguistic interests of some of his colleagues: “. . .at least it can never be laid at my door that I taught and studied the ancient languages as an end in themselves, forgetting that they are merely a means of recovering the content and significance of ancient human life for us of today” (*Pioneer* 354).

Orientalist” (1919) and “Historical Tradition and Oriental Research” (1924); *The Oriental Institute* (1933), in which he expounds on the purpose and character of the institution he founded; in both personal and official correspondence with John D. Rockefeller Jr., his long-time patron and friend; in reports and memos to the General Education Board, the Rockefeller-funded organization that supported the Oriental Institute; and in journal entries and family letters, many of which were published by his son Charles in 1943. This accumulated material affords a unique opportunity: juxtaposing his explicit disciplinary goals with the historical narratives that he constructed and situating this juxtaposition with the context of American academia and Egyptology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His specific vision for his discipline – dominated by the “history as science” paradigm, with the Oriental Institute as a “laboratory” for the study of mankind – is a theme that recurs throughout this work and will be integrated within the deconstruction of his major publications, illustrating the ways in which his disciplinary objectives and implicit personal motivations impacted his historical vision – and by extension, the *historical consciousness* of an entire formative era of scholars and the lay public.

### **III. A Lasting Legacy**

This leads to the third and final rationale for perceiving Breasted to be a pivotal figure of early 20<sup>th</sup> century academia: his legacy as the “father of American Egyptology”, an epithet given to him by George Sarton (1943: 289), who was himself a towering figure in the natural sciences. Breasted’s reputation consisted of not only his academic position and accomplishments, but also his engagement with the lay public as an author of high school textbooks, a frequent public (and traveling) lecturer, and even as the narrator of a

short documentary entitled “The Human Adventure” (1935) – a film about the excavation and research activities of the Oriental Institute.

Breasted’s standing within his contemporary academic community can be grasped partially through his peers’ reviews of his publications, as well as the many obituaries that appeared after his death in 1935. According to William F. Albright, Breasted was “America’s greatest Orientalist, and the greatest organizer of archaeological research whom the world has yet known. . . . the foremost humanist of our day among all specialists in the study of antiquity” (Albright 1936: 2). He was respected across multiple disciplines and noted for being both a historian and a scientist. For George Sarton, a professor of the history of science, Breasted’s “genius is that he was scientifically-minded to an extent of which the average historian is incapable” (Sarton 1943: 289). In fact, Breasted was the first historian/archaeologist to be chosen as a member of the National Academy of Sciences. To Egyptologist Herbert Winlock, he was a historian of the highest caliber, “whose name may well be mentioned with Prescott, Parkman and Motley.”<sup>6</sup> This is a reference to William Prescott, Francis Parkman and John Motley, American historians of literary flair and accomplishment who were known as “men of letters” – historians who “found in romantic conventions a way of giving the Past artistic order and contemporary moral significance” (Levin 1959: 229). Winlock’s comparison is not an unlikely one; indeed, it was Breasted’s skill with historical prose and his concern for the human condition through time that contributed greatly to his fame. He was, in the words of his colleague Alan Gardiner, “so far from being a specialist of the narrower sort that he would doubtless have preferred to hear himself

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<sup>6</sup> “Dr. Breasted Dies; Noted Orientalist”, *New York Times*, 3 December 1935.

described simply as a student of mankind. To him . . . the history of mankind was an epic” (Gardiner 1935). After his death, his peers remembered his imagination, creativity and most of all, his accessible literary style (e.g., Bull, Speiser, and Olmstead 1936). Seven decades onward, academic conventions and tastes have changed and it is his meticulousness that is most appreciated. In a new introduction to one of Breasted’s classic works, Peter Piccione (2001: xxxiv) states that “*A History of Egypt and the Ancient Records of Egypt* mark a milestone in the history of Egyptology, so precise and well-considered was Breasted’s methodology”.

For a broader view of his legacy and reputation, the news media provides a wealth of information. Thorough research into newspaper archives forms part of the foundation of this study. The results derive from a wide range of publications, representing major newspapers in national circulation as well as smaller, special-interest news sources. For American media, the research draws on the following primary sources, from the 1890s to the present: *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*. More specialized periodicals include *The Outlook*, a weekly magazine published in New York from 1870-1935; *The Independent*, a similar weekly magazine published in Boston; *The New York Amsterdam News* and *The Chicago Defender*, newspapers which represent the interests of the African-American community both locally and on a national level; and *The Bookman* and *The North American Review*, New York-based book reviews operating between 1895-1933 and known for their literary criticism and social commentary. News media in the United Kingdom is represented by *The Times* (London), *The Observer* and *The Manchester Guardian*.



The material brought together from this selection of periodicals forms a substantial body of evidence from which we can study several issues. Beginning with the narrowest lens, we can trace Breasted's public activities and interests from the perspective of his own statements and letters to the press, as well as from the viewpoint of those journalists and social commentators who wrote about him and the Oriental Institute. His involvement with the excavation of Tutankhamen's tomb, and especially his role as mediator between Howard Carter's team and the Egyptian government, increased his public profile both in America and abroad. He is cited as a historical authority in manifold situations over the course of decades; his written works – particularly *A History of Egypt* and *The Dawn of Conscience* – impacted the public's awareness and engagement with ancient history in numerous respects; and his publications influenced the cultural and religious discourse of early to mid-twentieth century America in profound ways. The social, political and educational currents of America between the first and second world wars were rife with *isms* – socialism, communism, fascism, Darwinism – and my aim is to illustrate how and why ancient history, and particularly the history of such an enduring and literate society as Pharaonic Egypt, was an *active and contributing element* to the social and political debates that raged through the communal consciousness of a nation. Since academia and those within it do not exist in a vacuum, these cultural currents were, in turn, critical factors in influencing the developing historiography of ancient Egypt. In other words, with a careful eye we can tease apart those elements of Breasted's history-writing, through time, that likely were directly indebted to a specific and changing social context; further, we can trace the impact of his historical narratives – and the field of early American

Egyptology in general – as they continued to influence a changing society during his own lifetime and beyond.

## Chapter 1

### Early Egyptology in America: Themes and Approaches

The history of Egyptology is a sub-discipline in its own right and its purview cuts a wide swath through European, American and Middle Eastern history, from the level of the individual to the broader scope of international politics and pop culture phenomena. On one end of the spectrum are the seemingly innumerable personalities – explorers, political figures, artists, authors, scholars – who have influenced the development of Egyptology as an academic discipline. At the other end are the larger issues that shaped the emerging discipline: the vagaries of warfare and political alliances that determined the accessibility of the Near East to western scholars; cultural trends that influenced the fluctuating popularity of Egypt with the lay public; and the development of museums, universities, and academic societies. These are just a few examples of an overwhelmingly diverse range of topics that concern the historian of Egyptology. In trying to approach Breasted's place within this trajectory – or the place of a generation of Egyptologists – we must first determine where to pick up the historical threads. How far back do we trace the evolution of Egyptological studies and how large do we allow our scope to become?

To answer this, it is helpful to review the literature on the history of the discipline – the nature of the sources at our disposal and the methodologies they employ – in order to identify a useful approach to contextualizing Breasted and his contemporaries. Or, as Henry Glassie (via James Deetz) pointed out: “Any method of inquiry must include a synchronic statement as a prelude to diachronic interpretation. Time must be stopped and states of affairs examined before time can be reintroduced, else the scholar will be unable

to determine his object of study clearly. He may include too much, or more likely, too little in his research, and when the object of his study mutates he will be caught without an explanation for the change” (quoted in Deetz 1989: 430). To this end, the range of material will be focused to serve the following goals: 1) assess the recent literature on the history of Egyptology to define its primary themes and parameters; and 2) identify alternative narratives that have emerged from post-colonial critiques of disciplinary history.

### **I. Themes, Approaches and Sources**

Several well-trodden themes in Egyptology’s history find inclusion in most of the recent introductory texts on history and archaeology. Although it is likely impossible to claim an academic consensus on any topic, there does appear to be a general agreement on the elements considered essential to an overview of the discipline’s history. An outline typically addresses the following set of issues: the transmission of knowledge from Classical sources; the eventual decline of ancient Egyptian language and scripts as they fell into disuse during Late Antiquity; and the western world’s gradual “rediscovery” of ancient Egypt, from misinformed speculation to scientific inquiry. Brewer and Teeter’s *Egypt and the Egyptians* (1999) is representative: the narrative begins with the Egyptians’ own interest in their past, then traces the fascination of Classical historians and tourists. Following the advent of Christianity and the Byzantine Empire, the most substantial contributions originate with Arab historians such as Makrizi and Abdel Latif, until European Renaissance explorers bring the history of Egyptology into the realm of the Western world. From this point forward it becomes a story dominated by the West: 17<sup>th</sup> century travelers and thinkers, such as Athanasius Kircher and John Greaves;

Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt and the subsequent explosion of antiquarian interest, embodied by the treasure hunter Belzoni and his patron, British diplomat Henry Salt; the work of the earliest professional Egyptologists, Auguste Mariette and Karl Lepsius; and the era of scientific excavation, of which Flinders Petrie and George Reisner are the oft-cited figureheads. This historical trajectory has become a regular component of Egyptology textbooks; thus, *Ancient Egypt: A Very Short Introduction* (Shaw 2004) traces the same path, though with less discussion of Arab historians; *The Complete Pyramids* (Lehner 1997) and *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt* (Ikram and Dodson 1998) both give some of the most thorough overviews available; and *Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt* (Bard 2008) presents an abbreviated version, as does *Cultural Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (Baines and Malek 1980).

Though not part of a standard Egyptological text, Dennis Forbes' (2003) overview of explorers, archaeologists, and antiquities bureaucrats from the Napoleonic era until World War I is a clear-eyed discussion of the prominent individuals of the time. His article serves as the opening statement of *Amelia Peabody's Egypt*, a book that contextualizes, historically and culturally, the popular series of Amelia Peabody mystery novels set in late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egypt. Though the various contributors maintain, with tongue firmly in cheek, the happy fiction that the novels' central characters were real historical figures, the chapters provide solid historical information and Forbes' is notable for clearly delineating the succession of stiff-collared and pith-helmeted archaeologists that passed through colonized Egypt, highlighting both their strengths and weaknesses, and largely avoiding sentimentality.

These overviews tell essentially the same story, though the focus shifts slightly to accommodate the particular interest of the author, whether it is the history of pyramid exploration or the development of archaeological technique over time. Perhaps the reason for such accessible (and somewhat standardized) treatments in recent books is the increase in the study of Egyptology's history over the past three decades. Brian Fagan notes that in the early 1970s, researching the subject was a more difficult task, scattered and obscure as the sources were (Fagan 2004: ix-x). Fagan's *Rape of the Nile* (originally published in 1975, and revised in 2004) now stands as an important work, synthesizing the long narrative of exploration from Classical antiquity until the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. It is, however, far from a specialist work: a self-described archaeological generalist, Fagan concentrates on the "heroes and villains" and the headline-making discoveries. In fact, a full third of the narrative is focused on the treasure hunter Giovanni Belzoni (1778-1824). The ethos of the period is ripe for analysis – a time of sanctioned looting driven by ambitious European consuls and authorized by complacent Ottoman officials – but in Fagan's book it is an adventure story, with Belzoni ultimately appearing as a rather dashing, perhaps even romanticized, figure. Thus, we read of an energetic and successful Belzoni who out-connived his rival treasure hunters, the French consul Drovetti's "lethargic agents", who resorted to bribing local officials and causing violent mayhem whilst our hero stood calmly, patiently by (Fagan 2004: 100-101). It is unsurprising that the almost exclusive source material used to tell this story is Belzoni's own memoirs.

Fagan remains ambivalent about the unregulated collecting, looting, and pillage in Egypt throughout history. He regrets that Egypt's cultural heritage, including some of

the most famous pieces of Egyptian art, is dispersed throughout the world. However, he is appreciative that the result of this dispersion – the ubiquity of Egyptian antiquities in Western museums – has brought Pharaonic culture into the global consciousness, thanks to the “efforts of the foreigners” (ibid. 10). Though this ambivalence rightly guards against hasty condemnation of practices that are best evaluated in historical context, it also has generated here a superficiality of analysis that recurs throughout the book, in which blame for the “rape” of the Nile is alternately assigned to locals and to foreigners, to Muhammad Ali Pasha and to European diplomats, without seriously interrogating the differing motives, underlying reasons, or lasting effects of any of it. For example, Muhammad Ali is depicted as a despotic ruler (ibid. 57; 81) whose demand for antiquities “corrupted the whole course of archaeology” (ibid. 186), whilst the egregious acts of foreign looting (such as stealing a library of Coptic manuscripts from incapacitated monks) are mentioned rather casually (ibid. 182). Mariette employed deception to export material from the Serapeum to the Louvre (ibid. 183); his absence from his own excavations led to struggles over the discovered material (ibid. 187); and he single-handedly blocked the attempt, in 1869, to establish a viable school for teaching Egyptians how to read hieroglyphs (Reid 1985: 235), yet his effectiveness in founding an Egyptian museum and antiquities service creates a largely complimentary legacy. My intention is not to reinforce a rhetoric of blame, but rather to demonstrate its weaknesses as a descriptive tool and an analytical framework.

When it comes to challenging the traditional narrative of Egyptological history, Fagan side-steps the discussion: in his review of Donald Reid’s *Whose Pharaohs?*, he opens with the banal expression that “The history of Egyptology . . . is a chronicle of

looting, skullduggery, and dedicated scholarship against often impossible odds” (Fagan 2003: 684), stating that Reid “inserts important Egyptian figures into an otherwise familiar story” (ibid. 685) without also acknowledging that Reid goes beyond this to question the legitimacy of that familiar story itself. We will return to the issue of alternate narratives later in this chapter. Insofar as *Rape of the Nile* has a place in the academic literature, it remains, despite its flaws in focus and bias, one of the only books devoted entirely to a broad account of Egyptology from its earliest manifestations until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Aside from *Rape of the Nile*, it is John Wilson’s *Signs and Wonders Upon Pharaoh: A History of American Egyptology* (1964) that provides the other full-length treatment of the discipline. It is challenging to evaluate, as it presents a complicated mix of elements and influences. The content belies the subtitle: this is not simply a history of American Egyptology, but of Egyptology in general. Almost all of the major figures (and a great many minor ones, as well) are discussed, some at length – John Gardner Wilkinson, E. A. Wallis Budge, Alan Gardiner and Flinders Petrie are just a few examples of non-Americans who play a prominent role in the narrative. In fact, a reviewer suggested Walter Bryan Emery as the only prominent European in Egyptology’s history that was *not* discussed in this book (Nims 1966: 345). The result is a work that is unfocused, sometimes anecdotal, and concerned with documenting the Americans on record regardless of their contribution; those who appear “only as a name and a function” find mention here (Wilson 1964: 23).

There is significance in who is missing or underrepresented in this otherwise exhaustingly detailed story: Ahmed Kamal, the first Egyptian to work professionally in



Egyptology and a staunch advocate of formally training Egyptians in the discipline, is mentioned only briefly (ibid. 192-193). His work is relegated to the category of “archaeology under nationalism”, that phenomenon which, for Wilson and other Westerners, marked the beginning of the end of the “golden era”, a period in which Europeans and Americans had virtual carte blanche to explore Egypt as they chose.<sup>1</sup> The aforementioned reviewer notes that Ahmed Yousef, who worked with George Reisner and reconstructed the famous Hetepheres furniture, is not mentioned at all (Nims 1966: 345). I would add that another notable Egyptian archaeologist, Mohammed Zakaria Goneim, is also absent. Though he met a tragic end, his absence is more likely due to the fact that his most famous work occurred in the early 1950s, an era that Wilson was not interested in covering due to the decreased number of foreign expeditions in Egypt following World War II and full Egyptian independence in 1953. The fact that Wilson includes a plethora of European Egyptologists only highlights the dearth of non-Western scholars. The situation is not improved by the occasional lapses into colonial snobbery. Wilson decries the “squalid modern villages” and “wretched mud huts” that impinged on the temples of Luxor and Edfu, praising Mariette for expelling the inhabitants and razing the houses (Wilson 1964: 47).

This attitude, however repugnant to early 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, is an artifact of the time in which Wilson worked, and the primary usefulness of the text is its insider view of the politics and culture that influenced archaeology of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Wilson –

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Reid (2002: 10) notes that the first edition of *Who Was Who in Egyptology* (1951) omitted Ahmed Kamal entirely; later editions included him but he is still, as late as 1995’s third edition, accorded only scant attention when compared to European Egyptologists. As Reid states, “...Kamal’s low profile cries out for contextual explanation. Works such as *Who Was Who* tend to abstract science from its sociopolitical context and downplay national and personal rivalries. This makes it impossible to understand Egyptology as these scholars lived it” (ibid. 10).

Breasted's ultimate successor as director of the Oriental Institute – knew many of the people and places that figure prominently; in fact, the book is dedicated to the Big Three of American Egyptology: Breasted, Reisner, and Herbert Winlock, each of whom receive their own chapter. Aside from this specific focus late in the book, the broad divisions of Egyptology's history are what we now recognize as standard: after the Classical and Coptic prelude come the eras of Napoleon, Champollion's decipherment, antiquarians, and finally the advent of professionalism. Although Wilson explicitly denies any attempt to explain the sudden rise of professional Egyptology in America (ibid. viii), he later speculates on the early 19<sup>th</sup> century American mentality as a deterrent to the study of antiquity (though without a serious attempt at contextualization, unfortunately): “The attention of the young nation was directed westward, rather than eastward. . . . The future was still more important than the past. What was ancient Egypt to such a people?” (ibid. 35-36). Ultimately, Wilson's history is guided primarily by the people who passed through Egypt and the discoveries they made, and secondarily by the Egyptian politics that directly affected their ability to excavate. He occasionally elaborates on the broader social and cultural trends back in America that influenced the development of the discipline – “In the social optimism of the day some liberals confused evolution with progress and happily sought indications of man's continuing betterment” (ibid. 112) – but not in a systematic way that would shed real insight on research goals and paradigms.

It is appropriate here to briefly discuss a book that stands alongside Wilson's as one of the only general overviews of *American* Egyptology. Nancy Thomas' *The American Discovery of Ancient Egypt* (1995) does not pretend to be comprehensive; it is a catalog that supplemented a traveling museum exhibition. Its three introductory essays

– by Bruce Trigger, Gerry Scott, and Nancy Thomas – combine to present an overview that is indebted to Wilson’s while also adding some nuanced understanding. The brief format, however, prevents any of the essays from contributing substantial original thought. Gerry Scott takes the most straightforward approach, reviewing early American scholarship and presence in Egypt and drawing heavily on *Signs and Wonders Upon Pharaoh*. Nancy Thomas picks up where Scott leaves off, provided a detailed chronicle of the American institutions that financed and directed archaeological and epigraphic work. It is left for Bruce Trigger, however, to look below the surface history of people, places and things. Trigger examines the place of ancient Egypt in the American imagination, and while some of his discussion is familiar territory – Biblical portrayals of Egypt and its role as a font of mysterious wisdom in the Byzantine and Renaissance periods – his emphasis on the specifically American forms of Egyptomania is useful. Even more refreshing is his engagement with intellectual and academic trends: the humanistic research philosophy of German universities found a foothold in America thanks to Breasted and Reisner (both trained in Germany), influencing the foregrounding of philology in the discipline (Trigger 1995: 29). Additionally, Trigger claims that the popular idea of cultural evolutionism guided the paradigms of social progress that we see in Breasted’s (and to a lesser extent, Reisner’s) work (ibid. 30).

Two shorter, recent books supplement Fagan’s and Wilson’s as useful, if general, syntheses that cover a broad time span of disciplinary history: Jean Vercoutter’s *The Search for Ancient Egypt* (1992) and the second half of Rosalie David’s *The Experience of Ancient Egypt* (2000). Vercoutter’s book is a slim volume written for the lay reader, but it is notable for its illustrations and the inclusion of some original source documents.

The most interesting of these is an excerpt of Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy's account of the 1940s effort to move the villagers of Qurna out of their homes, which sat atop tombs in western Thebes. Fathy notes the very real poverty of the villagers and their exploitation by middlemen, but does not gloss over the extent of the damage their looting caused. Such a text adds much needed balance to the typical narratives of Egyptological history, which tend to reflect the biases of their European source material.

Like Vercoutter and the introductory texts noted above, David's treatment begins on a standard note, following the typical division of early Egyptological history into Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance eras. However, this is followed by a more original approach in which she organizes the material by specialization – philology, drafting and epigraphy, excavation, and biomedical studies – providing a more focused description of a field crowded with notable figures. This is also one of the few sources that brings the discussion of interdisciplinary development into more recent times, documenting expeditions and scholars of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Too often, accounts of Egyptology's history are guided by the timeline of the “great” discoveries – the Rosetta Stone, the Deir el-Bahri mummy cache, the Nefertiti bust, Tutankhamen's tomb. Aside from the fact that nothing has ever quite equaled the tomb of Tutankhamen for sheer material value and dazzling sensationalism, it coincided with a changing ethos in Egyptian antiquities management: stricter guidelines for excavation and division of finds, and a rising Egyptian nationalism that demanded greater indigenous control over antiquities policy and its enforcement. As such, the romanticized image of an Egypt waiting to give up and hand over its treasures to the (Western) individual intrepid enough

to find them eventually began to fade, and scholars sometimes perpetuate this image of a glorious but faded yesteryear.

For example, despite a new “revised” edition, Fagan cannot spare more than four pages for anything that happened in Egypt post-1920s and there is a faint trace of lament when he writes that “discoveries continue to delight and amaze, but the international climate for archaeology has changed, in a world that is ardently nationalistic and increasingly jealous of its diverse cultural heritages” (Fagan 2004: 252). Wilson also closes his narrative shortly after the mid-1930s, citing the increasing political independence of Egypt and the cessation of the system which had been awarding artifacts to Western institutions (Wilson 1964: ix, 169).

The above sources can be said to represent, to greater or lesser degrees, a generalist approach. This is not a term to be used casually, as it carries a long history in the discourse of American academia. In 1909, Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton University, expressed his dissatisfaction with the tendency toward academic specialization, arguing that “the object of a liberal training is not learning, but discipline and the enlightenment of the mind” (Wilson 1925: 109). According to Wilson, education was not for accumulating information, but for gaining the ability to discern, combine ideas, think broadly, and interpret (*ibid.* 110).<sup>2</sup> Forty years later, a group of scientists advocated for the formal training of students as generalists, in this case scientific generalists (Bode et al. 1949). They defined a generalist as one who has a broad outlook and working knowledge of several fields, with the ability to “isolate critical elements, to establish the essentials of the logical framework, to reduce the problem to a few critical

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Egyptologist Barry Kemp has expressed a similar opinion, eighty years after Wilson: “Intelligence is not knowledge. It is the ability to cast into logical shape such knowledge as one has” (Kemp 1989: 2).

issues” (ibid. 555) and make an extremely complex field of study manageable. Two decades later, Henry Winthrop perceived generalism as working outside one’s area of formal training, of being interdisciplinary (Winthrop 1966).<sup>3</sup> Breasted’s work was also ensconced in generalist ideology in academia, not due to lack of specialization or training but to his commitment to synthesizing information, interpreting a big picture, and to a certain idealism toward the human condition.

Here, I reference the topic of generalism only in regard to the literature under review. The sources discussed thus far are attempts to establish the central elements of Egyptology’s history and reduce a long subject to manageable summaries, as per Bode et al.’s approach. As I noted earlier with respect to Fagan’s *The Rape of the Nile*, the result can be unbalanced. The dominant paradigm in several of these sources is one that foregrounds the *discovery* of material evidence, with little emphasis on interpretation. A catalog of artifacts, sites and the archaeologists who worked on them is necessary hard data; it is what Deetz refers to as archaeography – descriptive writing based on the material record (Deetz 1989: 430). However, it is not an end in itself, but a foundation for synthesis and analysis (ibid.). *Excavating in Egypt* (James 1982), a history of the Egypt Exploration Society from 1882-1982, is a detailed chronicle of archaeologists and their activities. However, there is little discussion of the impact of the Society and its work on the wider world, or vice versa. James notes in the postscript that “lessons can be learned from . . . the attitudes and practices of the Society’s early field-workers” (ibid. 179) but these lessons find no elaboration or deep consideration in this volume. Peter

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Fagan is a scholar of this mold; for a discussion of his role as an archaeological generalist and the negativity with which this approach is seen by many in the current academic establishment, see Balter 2004. Here, generalism is largely defined by the writing of popular books for a lay audience, or introductory-level textbooks.

Clayton's *The Rediscovery of Ancient Egypt* (1982) follows much the same pattern, even to the extent of organizing the material by region of the Nile, as in James' volume. The difference here is that in place of archaeologists, the main figures are artists and travelers.<sup>4</sup> The history of Egyptology is often defined by sequences of new discoveries, emphasizing the exploits and personalities of the individuals involved.

The only common exceptions to this model are Flinders Petrie and George Reisner. Although they made stunning material finds – the painted pavement at Amarna and the Menkaure statuary, for example – they are noted for their contributions to archaeological methodology, contributions that took decades to develop. Petrie, in particular, is also known for his lasting impact on Egyptian society (or in a narrower view, the society of the village of Quft) through his training of Qufti foremen, a system still in place today. However, for the majority of the events and people highlighted in general works on Egyptology's history, it is the cult of the object (and its discoverer) that dominates, from Belzoni to Howard Carter, from portable artifacts to temple walls.<sup>5</sup> Auguste Mariette achieves prominence in historical narratives for his impact on Egyptian administration – in 1858 he became the country's first Director of the Antiquities Works (later the Egyptian Antiquities Organization) and in 1863 he founded Egypt's first antiquities museum – but even these accomplishments find their center in the *object* and

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<sup>4</sup> The travel accounts of artists, explorers and intellectuals have been selectively anthologized (Fagan 2006; Manley and Abdel-Hakim 2004; Starkey and Starkey 1998), which can be seen as companion volumes to the kind of event-driven history writing that has been described above. In their original form, however, travel accounts and memoirs can be useful data for analyzing the flow of cultural influences through a specific space and time. There is no shortage of accounts from the famous (those of Mark Twain, Florence Nightingale, Gustave Flaubert and Amelia Edwards are just a sampling) in addition to the memoirs and correspondence of antiquarians and professional Egyptologists (Belzoni 1820; Budge 1920; Lepsius 1853; Petrie 1932; Chubb 1954; Dunham 1972; Wilson 1972; Edwards 2000; Drower 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Given that architecture – from entire structures to individual elements – can, and has been, relocated to Western locales (such as the temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum, the obelisks in Paris and New York, and various mastaba chapels, like that of Akhetmernisut in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston), it is fair to say that these monuments are also perceived as art objects to be collected and displayed.

the *site*: in the excavating, buying, selling and dividing of finds; in the access granted or denied to archaeological landscapes; in the control of material remains from their unearthing until their final destination. One is reminded of Julian Thomas' critique of the feminized landscape, objectified and commodified: "landscape art and empirical science are variations on a modern way of looking, which is also a power relation. It is a look which is disengaged but controlling, which assumes superiority, and which is gendered. . . . Archaeological understandings of landscape might thus be said to be voyeuristic and androcentric" (Thomas 2001: 169). This same gendered power relation can also be observed in a specifically Egypt-related object: an 1826 bronze medallion, celebrating the publication of the *Description de l'Égypte*, depicts ancient Egypt as a recumbent, partially nude female figure being unveiled by a standing Roman Gaul – an image of the "pacifying and feminizing of an alien power" (Wengrow 2003: 182-183). In this case, an artifact created by an imperialist entity depicts in visual metaphor the precise relationship that Thomas speaks of in the abstract.

The cult of the object and the power relationships that structure it are played out in the history of the discipline: when control of objects and landscapes works to the benefit of the dominant party, we have a successful historical figure: thus, Mariette's successor Gaston Maspero "expanded archaeological exploration . . . encouraging foreign excavators to come and work in Egypt, thereby initiating a 'golden age' of Egyptology and antiquities discovery" (Forbes 2003: 27). When control falters – as it did when the Nefertiti bust was surreptitiously removed from the country – or when the power dynamic shifts, as in the case of the Egyptian government exercising the right to retain all the finds from Tutankhamen's tomb, the result is scandal and discord between those



accustomed to taking from the landscape and those who feel dispossessed from their heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Both successes and scandals are used to serve the adventure story of Egyptology.<sup>7</sup> The story, however, should be more than this: it should be a study more firmly rooted in both intellectual and social history, situated within the wider framework of academia and society in which new discoveries serve interpretation and inform our understanding of cultural interactions, rather than stand alone as ends in themselves.<sup>8</sup> The decipherment of ancient Egyptian language would seem to be a topic that is well-suited to the concerns of intellectual history, and it has indeed resulted in valuable scholarship (e.g., Parkinson 1999; Ray 2007), but it is also a popular subject with generalist authors, in the sense of those who write for a lay audience. The Rosetta stone has become an (often decontextualized) icon, much like the Nefertiti bust, but more tellingly, the ancient Egyptian language itself has become reified. It has been boiled down to “hieroglyphs”, the “code” that was cracked, an *object* marketed for public consumption and an easy point to highlight on the continuum of Egyptological history.<sup>9</sup> It is often perceived as a hallmark for the essential mystery, the otherness, of ancient Egypt. The fallacy of this

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<sup>6</sup> The commentary on this issue is extensive; the following three sources are representative of the mainstream discourse on the Nefertiti bust: Hawass 2007; Krauss 2008; “3,500-Year-Old Queen Causes a Rift Between Germany and Egypt”, *New York Times*, 18 October 2009. C. Breasted (1942), Carter (1998) and Reeves (1995) are the most useful sources for the political controversies surrounding the discovery and excavation of Tutankhamen’s tomb.

<sup>7</sup> “The story of Egyptology is one of heroes and villains, bold deeds and incredible discoveries, of adventure, high-minded research, and downright skullduggery” (Fagan 2004: 253).

<sup>8</sup> In the words of Michael Shanks: “Edison, rather than inventing the light bulb, is shown to have engineered a heterogeneous or hybrid network of artifacts, scientific equations, dreams, capital, political good will, people, and a laboratory in Menlo Park” (Shanks 2001: 297).

<sup>9</sup> Thus, there are a variety of non-specialist books on the decipherment. Thomas Young and Jean-Francois Champollion, both of whom worked on Egyptian language and scripts, have been the subject of numerous popular books of varying quality, of which Adkins and Adkins 2001, Meyerson 2005, and Robinson 2006 are recent examples, as well as the more general Pope 1999. Also, Napoleon’s 1798 invasion of Egypt and the resulting *Description de l’Égypte* has generated recent books by Russell 2002, Burleigh 2007, Cole 2007, and Strathern 2008. Vivant Denon, the leading *savant* of Napoleon’s expedition, has drawn particular attention, for example in Nowinski 1970 and Russell 2005.

way of thinking is highlighted by Barry Kemp, who notes that the discontinuity between ancient Egypt and modern Western culture is an accident of history; Judaism and Christianity, ancient religions both, are not foreign to the modern world because forces did not intervene to break their continuity with the present day (Kemp 1989: 2-3).

Historian Robert Darnton makes a similar point, noting the dangers of reification: “To make the past appear as too remote a foreign land may be to cut off access to it. Instead of reifying foreign cultures in the hope of capturing something imagined as their essence, we need to interrogate them. We need to learn to speak their languages, to put the right questions to the relevant sources, and to translate the answers back into an idiom that can be understood by our contemporaries” (Darnton 2003: xiii).

## **II. Revisionist Approaches and Expansion beyond the West-Centric Framework**

In contrast to the broad, general narratives discussed above, a number of studies have deconstructed portions of Egyptology’s history to reveal a perspective that does not uncritically privilege the Western viewpoint; additionally, in works such as Donald Reid’s *Whose Pharaohs?* (2002), the entire narrative has been re-cast to investigate the roles of imperialism, Orientalism and nationalism in the approach to ancient Egypt from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Discussed below are several recent publications, employing a postcolonial perspective, that analyze the connections between the Pharaonic past and modern Egypt. First, however, we must briefly take note of a parallel development in revisionist historiography.

An equally important component of the problematization of Egyptology’s history – and not only the discipline’s history, but Egyptian historiography as well – is the Afrocentric critique of traditional academia. Afrocentrism is not simply a modern

buzzword denoting the worldview (which some scholars read as “marginal”, “fringe”, or “pseudohistorical”) of a special interest group. Afrocentrism is many things – controversial and challenging; fraught with identity politics; both a popular movement and an academic framework – and it is *not* new. In *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania*, Scott Trafton traces the interconnections between representations of ancient Egypt and negotiations of racial identity, noting that African Americans identified themselves as descendents of “Cush” as early as 1824, and juxtaposed the admiration that they saw bestowed on the ancient Egyptians with the enslaved status of Africans in America (Trafton 2004: 222-223). According to Trafton, “at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century there have always been at least two strains of representations of ancient Egypt in the cultural traditions of African Americans. . . . Egypt the *dark* land . . . the home of slavery and the throne of Ol’ Pharaoh; and Egypt the *black* land, a great African civilization, the land of Nefertiti and powerful black rulers” (ibid. 225).

From this beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, an Afrocentric understanding of ancient history has challenged the traditional narratives of Pharaonic Egypt and the nature of the discipline that produced them.<sup>10</sup> The accumulated literature on the subject represents a spectrum of positions: on the Afrocentric side, Cheikh Anta Diop published *Nations nègres et culture* in 1954; George G.M. James’ 1954 *Stolen Legacy* is a fundamental text, followed by the work of Yosef Ben-Jochannan (1970; 1971; 1972), more by Cheikh Anta Diop (1974; 1981), Molefi Asante (1980; 1987; 2000), and

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<sup>10</sup>This is of particular relevance to discussions of Breasted’s work, as his interpretation of emerging civilization in *Ancient Times: A History of Early World* involved a discussion of race and geography. Breasted considered Egypt to be more closely related to a Mediterranean sphere of the world than to the African continent (see Chapter 4).

Maulana Karenga (2004). Martin Bernal, with his *Black Athena* (1987; 1991), forced the discussion further into the scholarly mainstream. Egyptologists and Classicists have engaged in the discussion as well, though their participation has been only recently – considering the long history of African interest in Pharaonic culture – and largely reactionary (e.g., Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996; Lefkowitz 1997). Ann Macy Roth (1995; 1998) directly addressed the Afrocentric paradigm, though her writing is intended for her Egyptological colleagues and serves more as explanation of, rather than active dialogue with, the Afrocentric literature. More recently, David O’Connor’s and Andrew Reid’s *Ancient Egypt in Africa* (2003) presents a number of studies that compare Afrocentric interpretations with mainstream Egyptology (Folorunso 2003; MacDonald 2003; North 2003; Wengrow 2003b). Previously, professional Egyptologists had discussed issues of race and identity in a more distanced and largely de-politicized discourse (e.g., Bard 1992; Montserrat 2000).

This body of work is an important element of that scholarship which seeks non-Western, alternative histories (e.g., Blakey 1995; Schmidt 1995; West 1990), and it would be remiss not to mention it in that context. However, it is not within the purview of this study to cover at length the Afrocentric approach and its complex history. The discussion here focuses on alternative narratives of Egyptological history as they pertain to the European colonization of Egypt, Egyptian nationalism, and Western intellectual hegemony. As such, it is possible to identify several threads in this trend toward reinterpreting the traditional narrative of the “discovery” of ancient Egypt.

## A. Pharaonic and Muslim Egypt

...when the blaze of bonfires, lighted on the top of each of the three pyramids, cast a lurid glare on every side, bringing out the craggy peaks of the long desecrated mausolea of Memphite Pharaohs, tinting that drear wilderness of tombs with a light, emblematical of Lepsius' vindication of their inmates' memories, and leaving the shadows of funereal gloom to symbolize the fifty centuries of historic night, now broken by the hierologists:

“Dark has been thy night,  
Oh Egypt, but the flame  
Of new-born *science* gilds thine ancient name.”  
(Gliddon 1849; quoted in Lepsius 1853: 30)

On New Year's Eve in 1842, Karl Richard Lepsius and the members of his Prussian expedition lit bonfires atop all three of the Giza pyramids to announce, as Lepsius would later write in his memoirs, the changing of the Christian year in a Muslim land. This act laid claim to Egypt and its cultural heritage and proclaimed the supremacy of the West as surely as planting a flag atop the pyramid (which Lepsius did indeed do, on a separate occasion). The above quote is from George Gliddon's description of the event, which the editor of Lepsius' memoirs inserted as an apt illustration of that New Year's Eve. Gliddon's poetic rendering points to several themes in the European perception of ancient and modern Egypt, and the West's place therein. The “long desecrated mausolea” and “shadows of funereal gloom” imply the barbarism, ignorance and destructiveness of modern Egyptians. The bonfires are symbols of Western enlightenment, vindicating the long-slumbering splendor of ancient Egypt by virtue of the European ability to reawaken the knowledge of the Pharaohs from its “fifty centuries of historic night”. Egypt has been in darkness before the arrival and triumph of Western science, so says the poem. “Lepsius' vindication”, in the history of Egyptology, is simply a Prussian expression of that pan-European academic accomplishment which serves as

the basis for a sense of Western entitlement to Egypt's monuments, ancient history, and intellectual heritage. For the French, their particular claim was rooted in the conviction that the discipline of Egyptology began with Napoleon's expedition, advanced with Champollion, and solidified with Mariette (Reid 2002: 185).

However, recent scholarship has questioned some of these key points: namely, whether Arab Egypt was indeed ignorant and/or uninterested in its Pharaonic past; the degree to which Napoleon's expedition was a benevolent mission of enlightenment and scientific inquiry; the supposed stagnation of Ottoman Egypt and the despotism of Muhammad Ali; the absence of Egyptians from the development of Egyptology; and the continued Western intellectual hegemony that has outlasted political hegemony. The work of Elliott Colla (2003), Darrell Dykstra (1994), Fekri Hassan (1998), and Donald Reid (1985; 2002) has made strides in addressing the first of these questions. The concept of *jahiliyya* –the “age of ignorance” that preceded the Prophet Muhammad – combined with evidence that the Giza sphinx was defaced by a Muslim religious fanatic can lead to hasty assumptions that Pharaonic Egypt was at best ignored and at worst reviled by Arabs. Reid (2002: 30) acknowledges that many medieval Arabic sources do not take note of ancient Egyptian monuments, yet suggests that there existed a literary “countertradition” in which Pharaonic Egypt did play a part, as in the writings of al-Masudi, al-Baghdadi, al-Maqrizi and al-Idrisi. As in the case of medieval Europeans who saw the pyramids as Joseph's granaries (Burnett 2003: 67), medieval Arab authors interpreted ancient monuments through their own religious and cultural lens. The pyramids were variously described as tombs of Yemenite kings, repositories of knowledge during the Flood, and divine wonders; they were ascribed a specifically

Islamic legitimacy by the fact that the companions of the Prophet lived and died in their shadow (Dykstra 1994: 59; Reid 2002: 30).

The tendency to see discontinuity between Pharaonic and Islamic Egypt (e.g., Haarmann 2001) has led to the privileging of Western sources and the exclusion of what Okasha El Daly claims is a vast Arabic contribution between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (El Daly 2003: 39). To view European interest in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as the first useful inquiry into Pharaonic Egypt is perhaps related to the differing modes of Arab and Western scholarship: as Reid (2002: 36) insightfully notes, Muslim writing on ancient Egypt did not emphasize visual documentation in the manner that would make the *Description de l’Egypte* a benchmark of academic accomplishment. It is this series of events – Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the subsequent publishing of the *Description de l’Egypte* – that has elicited substantial revisionist critiques, not only of the French expedition itself but also of the periodization of Egypt’s history that followed from it.

### **B. Conquest or Enlightened Occupation?**

French engineer Edouard Devilliers, a member of Napoleon’s savants, wrote: “We were pleased to think that we were going to take back to our country the products of the ancient science and industry of the Egyptians; it was a veritable conquest we were going to attempt in the name of the arts” (quoted in Reid 2002: 33). This conquest of Devillier’s is at the heart of the revisionist critique of Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt. On the one hand, the French claimed to be freeing the Egyptian populace from Mamluk

oppression, bringing enlightened ideals to Egypt through their printing presses<sup>11</sup>, traveling libraries, savants and scientific accoutrements. On the other hand, the work of the savants and the *Description de l’Egypte* have attained renown partially because Napoleon pushed this aspect of the expedition to the forefront as a means of deflecting attention from the disastrous political consequences of his attempted occupation (Reid 2002: 32). The French expedition was an unprovoked, unsuccessful invasion of another country primarily for the purpose of geopolitical scheming: securing French interests in the Orient in the face of the British Empire (Burleigh 2007; Cole 2007; Strathern 2008). As evidenced by sentiments such as Devillier’s, the intellectual conquest of Egypt was no less overt, but it was much more successful.

French intellectual hegemony has had a lasting impact on the periodization of Egyptian (and Egyptological) history. The 1798-1801 occupation is often seen as the line of demarcation between pre-modern and modern Egypt (Reid 2002: 14; 31), and as the beginning of Egyptology as an academic (read: Western) discipline. Elliott Colla and Juan Cole have led the recent trend toward deconstructing this conventional view. Colla (2003) offers a different perspective on this fundamental episode, highlighting the contradictory place that France holds in Egyptian nationalist narratives. The 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French expedition was both celebrated and opposed within Egypt; it raised the question of whether the narrative had become one of benevolent colonialism rather than bloody occupation (ibid. 1045-47). Colla reveals that Egyptian nationalism has, in some cases, absorbed the Eurocentric narrative: for national elites, “the French occupation has often appeared as a necessary precondition for Egyptian modernity” (ibid.

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<sup>11</sup> The savants could print and distribute such tracts as Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* in Arabic because Napoleon had carried off the Vatican’s printing press – which had Arabic letters – in his previous invasion of Italy (Burleigh 2007: 20).



1045). Fekri Hassan (2003: 20) gives historical dimension to this phenomenon, noting that by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Egyptian professional elites were those that had received a French education.

Colla, Cole, and Reid all take a similar approach to rewriting the dominant narrative of colonial benevolence and the supposed Egyptian intellectual silence that stood opposite to European academia. Cole (2007: 248) emphasizes the mutual appropriation of cultural traits by the French and Egyptians. Colla (2003) illustrates this through what he terms a “dialogic literary phenomenon”, in which French and Arabic accounts of Napoleon’s occupation share common motifs that express both conflict and contact, violence as well as cultural exchange, revealing ambiguity rather than simple binary opposition between colonizer and colonized. Reid (2002) also focuses his analysis on juxtaposing European and Egyptian scholarship: Champollion and al-Tahtawi, Maspero and Ali Mubarak. Their work underscores the need to balance accounts of adventure, “skullduggery” and European eureka moments with a more politically- and culturally-inflected historical narrative.

The above discussion established that Pharaonic Egypt was not an unknown element in pre-18th century Egyptian discourse; while Napoleon’s savants did greatly influence the understanding of ancient Egypt in the West, the literature they produced was not speaking to a void on the Arab side. But what of the political periodization that uses the French occupation as a dividing line between pre-modern and modern Egypt, between Ottoman decadence and the social reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? There are two strands to this issue: 1) the view that Ottoman Egypt was stagnant prior to the French occupation; and 2) that Muhammad Ali, who came to power after the French withdrew,

was a despotic ruler whose successors led Egypt into financial ruin, culminating in the British occupation begun in 1882. Due to the published work and memoirs of Napoleon's savants, and the interest of the general public in ancient Egypt, these overtly political questions are intertwined with the later public and academic perception of Egypt's history.

For Egyptologist John Wilson, the outcome of French-Egyptian contact was that "their [the Mamluks'] dead hand was now unacceptable to a land which had experienced new contacts and ideas" (Wilson 1964: 16). Based on the small population of Egypt in the early 1800s, and compared to the jump in population by the 1930s, Wilson determines that early 19<sup>th</sup> century Egyptians were starving, diseased people with no initiative, which was the legacy of Mamluk rule (ibid. 17). This notion of a stagnant, barbaric Ottoman/Mamluk Egypt (as described in Gliddon's poetry, quoted above) was partially influenced by the scholarly and antiquarian output of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sandra Scham (2003: 173) notes that engravings of archaeological sites show idealized landscapes devoid of contemporary Egyptian architecture; where there is modern noise, it is in the form of Orientalist depictions of natives used for scale – "the forced separation of insignificant people from important places" (ibid.). In the same vein, Reid (2002: 2-3) notes that the frontispiece to the *Description de l'Egypte* shows no sign of modern Egypt or its population amongst the plethora of ancient monuments. He also notes that the architectural design of Cairo's Egyptian Museum is a celebration of Western intellectualism: the sculptures and inscribed names of Egyptology's main figures include no Egyptians, and the inscription over the main entrance is in Latin. Reid maintains that

the façade sent (and perhaps still does send) a clear message to Egyptians, that Egyptology is a Western discipline to which Egyptians have no access (ibid. 4-5).

It was mentioned above that some early Egyptian nationalists internalized this message, viewing the advent of European interest in Egypt as the beginning of a renaissance (Cole 2007: 245; Colla 2003: 1045). However, Juan Cole notes that Egypt had diplomatic and economic relations with Europe prior to Napoleon's invasion (Cole 2007: 245), and scholars reject the idea that social reforms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were due to the "civilizing" influence of European colonialism (e.g., Gran 1979). Yet the characterization of Ottoman Egypt as decadent and its leadership tyrannical survives in the figure of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849), who often finds short shrift in the history of Egyptology. In the power vacuum left after the French withdrawal from Egypt, Ottoman military commander Muhammad Ali managed to seize control of Egypt from the Mamluks and install himself as khedive in 1805, nominally answering to the Ottoman empire. His reign coincided with the rise of Egyptology, antiquities acquisition by Europe and North America, and Auguste Mariette's leadership of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization.

For Brian Fagan (2004: 57; 81), Ali was a despotic ruler who corrupted the course of archaeology by using antiquities as diplomatic gifts. John Wilson (1964: 21) saw him as "always as Oriental in his psychology" – i.e., one inclined to inactivity and vice – but with an interest in Western technology and progress. That he did indeed give antiquities as diplomatic gifts is indisputable and part of the standard history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Egyptology (e.g., David 2000: 111; Forbes 2003: 21). What is generally not mentioned in standard treatments is that Muhammad Ali attempted to institute an exportation ban on

antiquities as early as 1835, made unenforceable by complete European disregard and/or denunciation of it (Reid 2002: 56-57). Additionally, Muhammad Ali's awarding of antiquities – or whole monuments, such as obelisks – as international gifts was often at the behest or persuasion of European consuls. Champollion and the French consul, Drovetti, were behind the khedive's donation of an obelisk to France; if the pasha gave a collection of antiquities to one European power, consuls from an opposing power would appeal for an equivalent donation (Reid 2002: 57; 100). In *Conflicted Antiquities*, Elliott Colla (2007: 98-100) analyzes the role that Champollion may have played in influencing Muhammad Ali's antiquities policies. Although Champollion advised the pasha to conserve and protect Egypt's monuments, this was in relation to the destructiveness of Egyptian *fellahin*, and not in relation to European exportation of artifacts (or whole tomb walls, as in the case of Champollion and the Valley of the Kings). Ultimately, effective antiquities laws and a national museum would not come into being until it served the interests of, and was firmly controlled by, the West.

### **C. Recasting Egyptology's History**

The final issue to be addressed, briefly, in this review of alternatives to conventional Egyptological history is the absence of Egyptians from the discipline. A small number of scholars, whose names are already familiar from the above discussion, have begun to shed light on the contributions of Egyptians. Dykstra (1994) focuses on Ali Mubarak (1823-1893), a member of the Egyptian intellectual elite who wrote extensively, touching on Pharaonic Egypt in his histories. Mubarak synthesized medieval interpretations of the pyramids with contemporary observations, holding up Pharaonic engineering ability as a standard against which to judge Egypt's current state of affairs.

Dykstra cites Mubarak's works as critical evidence that Egyptian intellectual heritage was not entirely derivative from European influences.

Almost two decades prior to *Whose Pharaohs?*, Donald Reid (1985) wrote of the "decolonization" of Egyptology. He highlighted the early attempts to establish an Egyptology program – specifically, one that would teach hieroglyphs and ancient language – for Egyptians. Headed by German scholar Heinrich Brugsch in 1869, the school was derailed by Mariette, who feared for his position and would not permit any Egyptians to copy inscriptions in Cairo's museum. Among Brugsch's students was Ahmad Kamal, an important figure due to his tireless and lifelong persistence in attempting to establish Egyptians within the discipline. Under Maspero, Kamal was permitted to teach hieroglyphs to his colleagues from 1882-1886; this school was shut down when Maspero retired.

Reading Reid's account in juxtaposition with earlier histories of Egyptology, a striking fact is that the emergence of an indigenous Egyptology begins where the earlier histories cease. It was in 1924 that Ahmad Kamal's aspirations were realized and Sa'ad Zaghlul's government founded an Egyptological school at the Higher Teachers College. Egyptians Selim Hassan, Sami Gabra, and Mamud Hamza studied abroad, returning to become university professors in the 1920s and 30s; the Higher Teachers College graduated its first class of Egyptian archaeologists in 1928 (Reid 1985: 240-241). In contrast, Brian Fagan ends his history at 1923; John Wilson's comes to a quick close after the mid-20s and he relegates the Egyptian emergence to a few pages under the heading "archaeology under nationalism". However, to be fair to later historians, we must take note of David Jeffreys' recent comment regarding Egyptian Egyptology (a tautological

phrase, but necessary in this context). Jeffreys (2003: 14) states that Egyptians have struggled to emerge from the traditional-colonial mode of scholarship, which focused on historical particularism and language study. He does not find that Egyptians have contributed substantially to “extending the boundaries of the discourse”. Yet it is important to be aware that the most recent scientific discovery (Hawass et al. 2010) – in which palaeopathology at the molecular level has been applied to New Kingdom royal mummies – represents a largely Egyptian team, working within Egyptian institutions.

In closing this chapter, there is an important statement to be made regarding Egyptian and European scholarship. In focusing our analysis on colonial oppressions, or 19<sup>th</sup> century misuse of antiquities, or deconstructions of neo-colonial narratives, we must not overlook the fact that Western and Egyptian scholars had differing interests and motivations, which led to a reasonable divergence in the nature of the scholarship each side produced. In the case of al-Tahtawi, al-Jabarti, and Ali Mubarak, Pharaonic Egypt was only one of their many and varied intellectual interests (Reid 2002: 98). Arabic sources were concerned with a much longer view of Egypt’s history than the narrowly defined discipline of Egyptology. As the product of Classically-trained Western academics interested primarily in pre-Islamic Egypt, “Egyptology” was not a term that fully encompassed the interests of Arab intellectuals. Though Ahmad Kamal and his colleagues – Hassan, Gabra, and Hamza – struggled to establish themselves within the colonial framework of academia, other Arab scholars would not be confined within its narrower parameters.

## Chapter 2

### A Theoretical Framework

#### I. Theory, Archaeology, Egyptology

Cultural critic Terry Eagleton states, in concise fashion, “If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever” (Eagleton 2003: 2). In his account of the rise of cultural theory and its “halcyon days” between 1965 and 1980, Eagleton describes its emergence from civil rights awareness, anti-war protests, women’s liberation, and Black Power, as an often student-led movement that challenged the complicity of the intellectual and educational establishment in the rise of the military-industrial complex (ibid. 25-27). To hear his account of this politically charged atmosphere in which university education put many “at odds with the tasteless, clueless philistines who run the world and whose lexicon stretches only to words like oil, golf, power and cheeseburger” (ibid. 26) is to feel that it would have been impossible *not* to be theoretically engaged during this era. However, Eagleton’s academic affiliations – comparative literature and literary theory – as well as his biting critiques of contemporary culture, from capitalism to the popularity of Richard Dawkins, place him in a visible, mainstream position that is not characteristic of many humanities and social science disciplines.

In contrast to Eagleton, archaeologist Matthew Johnson lends a decidedly more ambivalent perspective to the role of theoretical reflection in the lives of academics. He reports that “To many, ‘theory’ is a dirty word both within and outside archaeology” (Johnson 1999: x). Rather than being a socially progressive milieu, archaeology, for Johnson, “remains appallingly unaware of its own theoretical underpinnings” (ibid. 182).

Unlike Eagleton's casual but effective approach to definitions, Johnson is reluctant to define theory at all, preferring to situate it in a range of meanings according to individual perspectives. This speaks to the specialization and fragmentation within archaeology, in which scholars from different traditions – from Classical to prehistoric North American – find themselves not only housed in separate academic departments, but also as members of archaeological subdisciplines that have varying degrees of engagement with theoretical discourse.

The juxtaposition of these two perspectives – Eagleton's and Johnson's – exemplifies the tensions inherent in writing about theory, archaeology, and Egyptology. The scholarly output of historical theory is vast and reading it can result in an immersion in the complexities of Hayden White's linguistic tropes, Jean-François Lyotard's rejection of metanarratives, and Fernand Braudel's layers of time. Pursuing questions of narrative discourse and representation ultimately leads to their most abstract manifestations in the work of such philosophers as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur. Archaeological theory often draws on these philosophical models – a recent example is Rosemary Joyce's (2002) indebtedness to Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin – but always with an eye toward the tangible material record through which archaeology engages with the past. When the focus is further narrowed to a specific arena of archaeology and history – as with Egyptology – the distance between this specialization and the larger theoretical *mêlée* can be wide indeed.

The general consensus from the 1980s onward has been that Egyptology is an isolated field, largely resistant to the theorizing in other disciplines. In 1983, four distinguished Egyptologists noted that “ancient Egypt has proven remarkably resistant to



the writing of history which is not traditional in character” (Trigger et al. 1983: xi), i.e., a history dominated by kings, politics, and the establishment of secure chronologies. In 1997, David O’Connor observed that an anthropologically-informed archaeology had made inroads in shaping the study of early civilizations in the Americas, Southeast Asia, and the Near East, but Egypt had remained only a weak participant in this development, and was rarely a significant factor in cross-cultural discourse (O’Connor 1997: 18). It is unsurprising that Bruce Trigger, one of the few scholars to have contributed a cross-cultural, anthropological study of Egypt – *Early Civilizations: Ancient Egypt in Context* (1993) – joined his voice with O’Connor’s in lamenting that to be an advocate of close ties between Egyptology and anthropology was to be in a lonely position (Lustig 1997: 7). In his millennium address to the International Congress of Egyptologists in 2000, O’Connor was still sounding the call for the need to be theoretically conscious, listing “model building, testing, discarding, and reformulating” to be one of the top two priorities for Egyptology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (O’Connor 2003: 8).

Most recently, Ian Shaw and Kent Weeks, in separate summaries of the current state of Egyptology, have both characterized the discipline as a traditionally conservative one. According to Shaw, “While mainstream archaeologists such as Lewis Binford, Colin Renfrew and Michael Schiffer were expanding the theoretical base of archaeology, most Egyptologists were still preoccupied with the business of pure data-gathering and history-writing” (Shaw 2004: 26). For Weeks, Egyptian archaeology remains an isolated specialization characterized as anti-theoretical, in which method and theory from other sources, both archaeological and from the wider academic world, have had relatively little lasting impact (Weeks 2008: 20). It is not only in anthropological and

archaeological theory that Egyptologists have tended to be viewed as minority participants. In Michael Bentley's comprehensive, 1000-page volume *Companion to Historiography* (1997), neither ancient Egypt nor historians of ancient Egypt find any significant treatment. In contrast, Classical history is represented and historians of Greece and Rome, such as Edward Gibbon and especially Leopold von Ranke, figure in the development of historiographical tradition in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup> In the section dedicated to "area studies", the Near East as a whole is absent. To be fair to both Bentley and to Egyptologists, the Western scholarship of Egypt has a much shorter history than that of Classical studies; nevertheless, studies of the ancient Near East are not included in the sections dedicated to modern historical scholarship.

Lustig (1997: 7), O'Connor (2003: 8) and Shaw (2004: 26) all cite Egyptologists' accomplishments in the realm of data acquisition when mentioning their minority participation in the field of theory. Or as W.Y. Adams, with a hint of condescension, puts it:

The majority of Egyptologists have always been antiquarians at heart. The study of ancient texts, the enjoyment of ancient art and the collection of ancient artifactual remains have been sufficient ends unto themselves. . . . The goal of mainstream anthropologists has always been to attain a certain kind of theoretical understanding, rather than humanistic enjoyment: to construct theories, based on the comparative study of different peoples, that would in the end contribute to our own self-understanding. . . . Egyptologists are perhaps more ready to look at their pet civilization in a comparative framework than was traditionally the case, but I think the influence of particularism is still very strong in the discipline. (Adams 1997: 28, 31)

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<sup>1</sup> Of James Henry Breasted there is no mention in the index, nor in the lengthy chapter on modern historiography since the Enlightenment. This seems to indicate that his work, so tremendously popular in its time and foundational to early Egyptology, has not been widely considered outside the confines of Egyptology.

Egyptologists are not quite so insular or archaeologically unsophisticated as this would suggest, especially considering the work that has been done since this statement was published, from the late 1990s onwards. There are exceptions to the discipline's traditional concern with data-gathering and description. In his 1989 modern classic, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, Barry Kemp's opening sentence sets the critical and reflective tone of the volume: "How should we study the society of man?" In contrast to Adams' recent claim that Egyptologists are not primarily interested in diachronic change or "culture in any dynamic sense" (Adams 2007: 29-30), Kemp in his opening pages gets down to the business of defining culture, the ways in which to study it, and the ultimate goal of investigating "the variations of mental pattern and behavioral response which man has created to come to terms with the reality around him" (Kemp 1989: 5).

John Baines, another renowned Egyptologist, has produced notable cross-cultural research (e.g., Baines 2000; Baines and Yoffee 1998; 2000; Houston, Baines and Cooper 2003) and a recent series of volumes published by University College London's Institute of Archaeology were explicitly formulated to integrate Egyptology with mainstream anthropology (see Ucko 2003). Stuart Tyson Smith and Janet Richards are both prominently engaged with archaeological and anthropological theory with regard to colonialism and ethnicity (Smith 1997; 2003a; 2003b), conceptual landscapes (Richards 1999), socioeconomic differentiation in mortuary contexts (Richards 1997; 2000; 2005) and the integration of textual and archaeological analysis (Richards 2002). In the realm of social theory, several Egyptologists have contributed important work: Terry Wilfong on gender, women and individuals in the textual and archaeological record (Wilfong

1997; 2002a; 2002b); Lana Troy and feminist studies in the ancient world (Troy 1997); Dominic Montserrat on sexuality in Graeco-Roman Egypt (Montserrat 1996; 1998); Jan Assmann's engagement with cultural memory and collective consciousness (Assmann 2002); and Lynn Meskell's wide-ranging body of work on gender, individuality, and embodied experience (e.g., Meskell 1994; 1998; 2000; 2002).<sup>2</sup>

In summary, we are presented with a complex situation when considering the role of theory in Egyptological research. It is often decried as theoretically lacking by those both within and outside the discipline, and Egyptology as a whole receives little recognition as a significant player in the intellectual discourses that inform other humanities and social science fields. And yet, individual Egyptologists are contributing work that is seriously engaged with contemporary currents in social theory. In addition to the ill-defined place of Egyptology within wider academic discourse, we must also be concerned with the issue of scope. To reflect on our guiding assumptions, as Terry Eagleton suggests, critically examining the underpinnings of method and interpretation, ultimately leads to the abstractions of epistemology and recondite philosophers. The challenge for the historian and archaeologist is to join epistemology with the practical realities of research and interpretation.<sup>3</sup> The question that must now be addressed, then, is how to forge an approach that is engaged with social theory; rooted in the concerns particular to studying a literate, ancient civilization; and most importantly, relevant to the specific case of analyzing the work of James Henry Breasted and early 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography.

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<sup>2</sup> I have discussed elsewhere the modes of practice in Egyptian historiography, particularly as they pertain to cultural and social history; see Ambridge 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See Evans 1999: 9 for comments on the chasm between epistemology and actual historical problems.

## II. Establishing a Theoretical Framework

It is important to state at the outset what this section will *not* be: it will not exhaustively discuss the various trends in contemporary historiography, nor review the trajectory of historical theory. The literature on these topics is vast – from the roots of Western historical inquiry to its current multifarious state – and represents the thoughts of scholars far more qualified than myself to comment on these issues.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the purpose here is to establish a useable framework for analysis and interpretation. This analysis in subsequent chapters will be centered on three of Breasted's texts – *A History of Egypt* (1905), *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (1912), and *The Dawn of Conscience* (1934). To frame the overall structure of the investigation, it is useful to conceptualize two levels of inquiry. The first level is a critical examination of the texts themselves according to theories of deconstructive textual analysis. Using a set of guiding questions drawn from the work of contemporary theorists, my goal is to interrogate the picture of Egypt that Breasted presents; in other words, Breasted's vision of the ancient Near East – *his* Egypt – is under scrutiny. The second level, which inevitably involves some overlap with the first, is an analysis of the social context surrounding and informing his construction of Egypt. The aim is to use a variety of

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<sup>4</sup> I have found the following sources to be preeminently useful in teasing apart the complexities of historical theory. Richard Evans' *In Defense of History* (1999) has the virtues of being articulate and candid, large in scope but concise in expression, and ultimately optimistic about the challenges to historical interpretation. His vision suffuses my own sense of history's history. Terry Eagleton's aforementioned *After Theory* (2003) is witty, wise, and occasionally polemical, expanding my understanding of cultural theory beyond the bounds of history and archaeology. Michael Bentley's *Companion to Historiography* (1997) provides essential contextualization of changing historical discourse through time. Ernst Breisach's *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (2007) is a denser overview of the discipline. Contemporary (and often postmodern) approaches are well-covered in Barker et al.'s *Uses of History: Marxism, Postmodernism and the Renaissance* (1991); Green and Troup's *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth Century History and Theory* (1999); Cannadine's *What Is History Now?* (2002); Burns' *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies* (2006); and Berger's *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective* (2007). Barry Smart's *Postmodernity* (1993) and Christopher Butler's (2002) introduction to postmodernism are both useful complements to understanding contemporary historical theory. Finally, Simon Schama (1987; 1991) writes with a wit and wisdom that is both humbling and inspiring.

sources – outlined in the introduction (pp. 12-13; 15-16) – to gain an understanding of his narratives in the context of the society in which they were produced.

The framework, or guiding questions, that structure the first level of analysis is heavily indebted to Rosemary Joyce's *The Languages of Archaeology* (2002) and, to a lesser extent, to Julian Thomas' *Archaeology and Modernity* (2004). Both of these works are suffused with a postmodern sensibility, so a brief introduction to the issues and vocabulary of the texts is in order. Joyce and Thomas write from a theoretical position that has been developing since the 1970s, when a branch of postmodernism arose (led by French philosophers Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard) that questioned the very existence of absolute truth and universality of human nature (Breisach 2007: 422). Condensing one aspect of their highly complex thought into a simple equation would yield the following: claims to absolute truth + socio-political power = oppression, dominance, catastrophe. Hegemonic structures and authoritarian control are the bywords of postmodernist opposition (Butler 2002: 13). In place of essentialism and structuralist, deterministic approaches to understanding the human condition, the postmodernists of the 70s and 80s emphasized constant change, flux, and contingency (Breisach 2007: 422). This sense of flux in human history can be detected in the writing of contemporary historians, such as Simon Schama, who stresses uncertainty and indeterminacy (Schama 1991: 321) – “a history respectful of contingency, mistrustful of inevitability, indifferent to any predetermined route or destination” (Schama 2000: 17).

A central concept in this worldview is that of *narrative*. The term carries various meanings; at its most basic it simply refers to a sequential ordering of events in a descriptive format. However, this is not quite the sense of narrative that the

postmodernists were so eager to attack. It was the concept's higher levels that Lyotard criticized: master or grand narratives that attempt to explain large segments of history; and especially "metanarratives", which claim an authoritative underpinning for their historical explanations, such as the Marxist belief in human progress toward utopia or a Christian triumphalist view of world history (Green and Troup 1999: 204; Butler 2002: 13). Narratives were decried as the forms that established and perpetuated dominance by the majority power, legitimated political and cultural hegemony, and repressed the alternative narratives of the marginalized. They were perceived as embodying and enforcing the socio-political agendas and prejudices of their authors.<sup>5</sup> For some, history essentially becomes propaganda (Evans 1999: 176). Perhaps the most famous analysis is Edward Said's critique of the West's grand narrative of the East in *Orientalism* (1978).

In thinking about representations of the world, the postmodernists relied on an already-established tradition of problematizing language, in what is referred to as the linguistic turn. This is particularly important in approaching the work of Rosemary Joyce, as she draws substantially on Roland Barthes – one of the primary French philosophers of semiotics. In brief, proponents of the linguistic turn maintain that language is not simply a passive reflection, or conveyor, of an external reality. Rather, the signifiers – words, images, symbols – actively shape, define, constitute and otherwise construct the signified – the subject. Meaning is created out of the relationships between signifier and signified (Breisach 2007: 423; Butler 2002: 16-17; Green and Troup 1999: 206-207). Taken to its extreme, this position claims that there is no accessible external reality – all is text, and everything exists in a realm of intertextuality. Nothing is truly

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<sup>5</sup> The irony that the act of announcing the death of metanarratives was, in itself, a form of narrative was not lost on the postmodernist philosophers: "Are 'we' not telling, whether bitterly or gladly, the great narrative of the end of great narratives?" (Jean-François Lyotard, quoted in Smart 1993: 5).

original or descriptive of an objective phenomenon; the act of communicating necessitates the use of a linguistic system and internalized set of references, rendering everything referential to something previously existing.

From this dizzying abstraction we are brought back down to earth by the pragmatism of both Richard Evans and Terry Eagleton. Evans makes the salient point that not all narratives – even the meta – are constructed by those in power; one of the most obvious examples is the Marxist agenda, which was initially revolutionary and proletarian in spirit (Evans 1999: 129). With characteristic verve, Eagleton skewers the current tendency to attack anything that is normative and to view all conventions as oppressive – it is because of societal norms that murderers are punished and traffic lights are obeyed (Eagleton 2003: 13-16). Most significantly, he notes that to oppose all norms is to take a universalist stance (anathema to postmodernists!) and to glorify the marginalized above all else is to fetishize the Other, negating the possibility of contradictions and conflicts within the majority group itself (*ibid.* 15; 20-21). These are important points to remember when considering a body of work such as Breasted's, which could all too easily be dismissed as passé due to language and characterizations that are jarring to our politically correct ears. Setting up binary oppositions – imperialist/colonized, racist/oppressed, dominant/marginalized – without critical reflection would be to overlook the nuanced position of Breasted and his work within his own society.

We can now approach Rosemary Joyce and Julian Thomas with an awareness of the discourse that informs their work. Because I will employ Joyce's concepts in my



analysis of Breasted's writing, I provide here a brief summary of those that are relevant to narrative deconstruction.

In Joyce's estimation, examining the ways in which archaeologists create representations of the past is a critical component of a post-processual archaeology. Taking her cue from Ian Hodder, she emphasizes that narrative and dialogue are central concepts in analyzing archaeological texts and narration is always an act of social communication. Echoing Derridean linguistic theory, Joyce perceives narratives as dialogic with the texts – written, voiced, etc. – that have already emerged from the discipline's past and current scholars (in other words, "complex intertextuality"). Of relevance to my goal is the assertion that "consideration of the relations between the represented subject and the author shaping that subject through writing" (Joyce 2002: 3) is an accepted mode in social anthropology.

Joyce employs a number of important concepts in the analysis of archaeological writing. Polyphony – or what might be called multivocality, elsewhere – refers to a number of independent voices, or dialogic threads, that are present in a narrative. The degree to which these threads are subsumed under an authoritative authorial voice depends on the dynamism that is maintained in, or filtered out of, the final product. A closely related term is heteroglossia (taken from the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, on whom Joyce also draws heavily). Put simply, heteroglossia indicates the varieties of dialect, vocabulary – or all too often in academic writing, jargon – used in a particular narrative or school of thought. Thus, the New Archaeology of the 1960s was intentionally steeped in the language of positivist science; post-processualist approaches are often equally steeped in the language of French philosophers (ibid. 4-14).

A number of features underlie the linguistic forms of archaeological (and historical) writing. The use of metaphor can overtly or subtly influence the audience; according to Bakhtin, this shapes ongoing reality (ibid. 31). Joyce demonstrates that masculine constructions are among the core metaphors used in writing or speaking of archaeological fieldwork; consequently, aspects of the discipline become distinctly gendered (ibid. 18-26). Chronotope, another concept borrowed from Bakhtin, refers to the spatio-temporal relationship that is established by the narrative. Two chronotopes – progress and discovery – are used frequently in representations of the past. Progress is ideological, implying a linear narrative of human improvement – “a form of eschatology, a utopian chronotope” (ibid. 35) – that neglects the microscale in favor of broad trends in societal development. Discovery, on the other hand, is a narrative situated in experience and a sense of timelessness that deemphasizes the gap between past and present, advancing the view that the author/discoverer is accessing observable, empirical facts of the past.

Julian Thomas’ *Archaeology and Modernity* examines the way we think about the past in terms of those aspects of our worldview that are indebted to the emergence of modernity. Thomas maintains that we do not reconstruct the past; rather, we establish a relationship between past and present that is informed by our own modern conceptual baggage (Thomas 2004: 1). This echoes Rosemary Joyce’s emphasis on the dialogic qualities of narrative, in which the relationship is not only between past and present, but also between the author’s voice and the languages of other disciplines and discourses. I will return to Thomas’ work in the following chapter; here it is sufficient to note that several common principles or aspects of a modern worldview are problematic when

applied to the ancient past. Utopian formulations – Joyce’s chronotope of progress – are a distinctive element of modernity emerging from Francis Bacon’s 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of science (ibid. 11-12). The Enlightenment, emphasizing reason, universality and social progress, informed the modern practice of perspective drawing and scientific drafting, in which the world is externalized and understood according to as a series of classifications that privilege a distanced, objective and transcendental observer (ibid. 27-30).<sup>6</sup> Individualism finds its origins in philosophical humanism and 19<sup>th</sup> century German Romanticism, and the triumphalist perspective of humanity – in which white, Western, male-dominated society is the natural outcome of progress – is rooted in Victorian evolutionary theory (ibid. 119; 126-140).

These are broad generalizations that will be discussed in further detail in following chapters. The purpose here is to use Joyce and Thomas as a starting point for establishing a set of guiding questions in the approach to Breasted’s historical narratives. A fundamental level of analysis is attention to language and nuance, with the aim of discerning the guiding metaphors, core assumptions, or chronotopes that Breasted utilizes, whether implicitly or explicitly. What are the languages – heteroglossia – present in Breasted’s narratives? Does he employ the vocabulary and ideology of positivist science, or of German humanism and romantic history, or of cultural evolution, progress and triumphalism? Need any of these categories be mutually exclusive in effective historical narrative?

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<sup>6</sup> As Thomas provocatively claims: “Implicitly, this mode of representation relies on the notion that material things have an unproblematic character which is fully available to the sensory apparatus, and that by rendering them accurately as they appear to one viewing subject, their fundamental character can be conveyed to another. Both perspective art and scientific drawing are evidence of the eviction of meaning from the world” (Thomas 2004: 27).

What is Breasted's approach to temporality in historical interpretation?

Contemporary historians recognize that temporal scale is a key component of analysis, as different aspects of society – government, art, technology, social norms and ideology – operate and change according to different levels of time. Fernand Braudel identified multiple time scales – from surface events to the *longue durée* – in his study of the Mediterranean world. How does Breasted's use of temporal scale affect his interpretations? Given the shifting attitudes toward hierarchy and authority during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is also revealing to examine the ways in which he depicted authority, regime, “high culture” and social norms in ancient Egypt, particularly in regard to a diachronic perspective. Does he privilege certain explanatory models, and can such models even be discerned in his writing, based on the historical practices that were in vogue during his lifetime?

Positionality and reflexivity have become bywords of a postmodern approach, but such self-reflection was certainly not invented by the postmodernists. On the contrary, many trends that are perceived as distinctly postmodern draw on intellectual developments of long standing (as indicated throughout Thomas 2004). It is not, therefore, inappropriate to ask whether Breasted acknowledged or wrestled with his own positionality in regard to the ancient world. In fact, in the opening pages of *The Dawn of Conscience*, he acknowledges his subjectivity on the issue of religion and calls for a new social idealism based on the Egyptian past, while simultaneously affirming the empirical nature of the evidence (and its place in *evolutionary process*). This leads to an examination, advocated by both Joyce and Thomas, of the relationship created between the represented subject and the author. In creating this relationship, is Breasted making

essentialist arguments about human nature? Is he referring to social ideals by which he is implicitly or explicitly evaluating ancient Egyptian society?

Finally, there is the relationship between Breasted's narratives and his contemporaries to be considered. If archaeological knowledge creates communities of diverse participants engaged in the past (Joyce 2002: 1), what is the nature of the discourses – intellectual, nonspecialist, religious – that arose in response to his (very popular) texts? Who were the disciplinary voices that he was in dialogue with, both internal and external to Oriental Studies? Are his characterizations of the Egyptian past perhaps extensions, to a certain degree, of himself, his contemporaries, or his society? Following Said (1978), we can ask: was Breasted constructing a West inasmuch as he was constructing an ancient East?

### Chapter 3

#### *A History of Egypt: Literary Science and Social Change*

The scope of this chapter is defined by Breasted's early career: his graduate training in Germany; the tenuousness of his first years at the University of Chicago, resulting in much time spent abroad in Europe; and his early writing, the pinnacle of which was *A History of Egypt* (1905) and its supplement, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (1906). I will first briefly discuss the need for a close analysis of Breasted's academic writing, followed by an examination of his divergence from predecessors and colleagues in his approach to history-writing. I argue that Breasted introduced a new form of scientific Egyptology which was both indebted to his experiences in Europe but also distinct from the kind of Egyptology practiced in Europe. His approach, which I term literary science, was aimed at a specifically American audience, as he sought to increase – through a humanities discipline – the scientific standing of America on the world stage. *A History of Egypt* is the focus of an analysis on Breasted's contribution to explanations of social change in antiquity.

#### **I. Finding a Niche for Interpreting Breasted's Text**

Studies on the history of Egyptology have risen in popularity and prominence in recent years. Not only is this an encouraging move towards disciplinary self-reflection, but it also sharpens the focus of the present work, providing a context for early Egyptology and for Breasted himself. 2008-2010 alone saw a steady output of scholarship in what is a small but increasingly noticeable subfield. The *Journal of Egyptian History*, which encompasses the history of Egyptology and modern

historiography of ancient Egypt, was founded in 2008. In the spring of 2010, the Egypt Exploration Society hosted a conference on multi-disciplinary histories of Egyptology. The content ranged from studies of nationalist archaeologies and Egypt in cinema to papers on specific individuals such as Sir Alan Gardiner and Edward William Lane. There has also been recent interest in the West's perception of ancient Egypt, as in the 2010 exhibitions at Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Museum and Leiden's Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, both of which present mid-19<sup>th</sup> century travel photography – the work of Francis Frith and Maxime Du Camp, among others – as illustrations of Romantic and Orientalist views of Egypt.

Recent research by Janet Richards and Stephen Quirke has advanced a critical component of Egyptology's history: the social history of archaeology (Quirke 2007) or "the archaeology of excavations" (Richards 2007). Janet Richards' work at the Abydos Middle Cemetery has revealed that modern excavation interfaces with excavations of the past, particularly in a site with a long history of exploration. In the case of the Middle Cemetery, it is more complex than excavating just the *redim* (backdirt) of previous exploration. Prior to the 2007 season, scholars' understanding of the spatial relationships in the mortuary landscape was shaped by the reports of Lepsius and Mariette, which were later revealed to be misleading. Furthermore, inscribed blocks from the chapel of Weni were found not in their original emplacements, but in secondary locations due to Mariette's excavations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Richards 2007: 315-318). As a result, archaeologists must interpret a palimpsest that reflects not only ancient activity, but also engages the history of the discipline itself. Stephen Quirke takes a textual approach to the history of archaeology, analyzing Petrie's records of local labor at his expeditions

from the 1880s to the 1920s (Quirke 2007; 2010). Quirke sees this archive as a resource for counteracting the perception that modern Egyptians are uninterested in the Pharaonic past<sup>1</sup> and, perhaps most importantly, for including local workers in the disciplinary narratives of archaeological discovery. As Quirke rightly points out, the phrase “Petrie dug at Amarna” leaves out those who did much of the work of finding (Quirke 2007: 276-277). The history of Egyptology might look very different indeed if those wielding the hoes were brought out of the background.

Just as Quirke’s research demonstrates that narratives of Egyptology’s history – and especially those concerning the period of British control in Egypt – require more nuanced understandings, so too does recent work on James Henry Breasted. Recently on exhibition at the museum of the Oriental Institute is *Pioneers to the Past: American Archaeologists in the Middle East, 1919-1920*, with Breasted’s reconnaissance mission through the post-World War I landscape of the Middle East as its focal point. The accompanying catalogue (Emberling 2010) investigates multiple issues associated with this period in the trajectory of American Egyptology, including nationalist archaeology, colonial politics, the antiquities trade, and intellectual hegemony. The contributors cover this period well: historians discuss the state of the Middle East as Breasted encountered it and the effect of colonial administration on antiquities laws (Gelvin 2010; Kersel 2010); and Breasted’s archived correspondence from the expedition is used to chart in detail his 11-month path through the Middle East (Emberling and Teeter 2010). At the heart of this work is the theme of Breasted as a pioneer of institution-building. Though

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion of this issue is particularly important at the present time due to the stance of James Cuno, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, who argues that modern nations do not necessarily have a connection with their ancient past and therefore countries of origin should not have exclusive claims to antiquities; he criticizes current UNESCO legislation and calls for a restoration of the partage system (Cuno 2008; for commentary see also Luke 2009 and Emberling 2010: 12).



the breadth and popularity of his scholarship is noted, Emberling emphasizes Breasted's founding of the Oriental Institute as perhaps his greatest legacy to the field (Emberling 2010: 9). Indeed, the reconnaissance mission that is the focus of the exhibition was the foundation on which the Institute's future activities were built. Breasted's technical advances in such fields as aerial photography have also been noted recently (Bonn-Muller 2010).

This highlighting of his administrative acumen is characteristic of research on Breasted; since the publication of Charles Breasted's biography *Pioneer to the Past* in 1943 and John Wilson's *Signs and Wonders upon Pharaoh* in 1964, what little has been written specifically about Breasted has focused on his role as founder and fundraiser.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a gap exists in the current scholarship; namely, Breasted's core writings have found little critical analysis. It is this observation which lends focus to the present chapter. Because he wrote so prolifically and so widely – and because he was privy at very high levels to the charged international politics of the post-World War I Middle East (Emberling 2010) – there are many threads that can be followed in the study of even one period in Breasted's career. What I have aimed to demonstrate here is twofold: first, that work on the history of Egyptology is timely and relevant to the modern world; and second, that some of the threads of Breasted's life have already seen fruitful research and what is needed is an analysis centered in his writing, rather than his administration.

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<sup>2</sup> See the work of Jeffrey Abt (1993; 1996a; 1996b), which focuses on Breasted and Rockefeller's plans for establishing museums, and his forthcoming book entitled *American Egyptologist: James H. Breasted and His Oriental Institute*. The attention given to Breasted's administrative skills is not undeserved. Perhaps one of the most telling indications of his savvy is by comparison: in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Lord Curzen and Henry Tattan appropriated a library of Coptic manuscripts by getting the monastery's monks drunk, rendering it impossible for Mariette to later purchase Coptic manuscripts from the patriarch in Alexandria (Fagan 2004: 182). In stark contrast, by 1928 Breasted had secured the right to publish Syriac manuscripts held by monasteries by making the Archbishop of Syria, His Beatitude Mar Severius Barsaum, a member of the Oriental Institute (Breasted 1928: 529).

Many aspects of his life and his socio-political milieu necessarily come into play when interpreting his written work, but the degree to which these aspects are investigated will be determined, first and foremost, by the content of his writing.

## II. History in a Single Volume

When we encounter *A History of Egypt* today, it may strike us as a hefty tome: 634 pages of text – and almost exclusively so, as images that share space with text are few and far between – plus 150 additional illustrations on unnumbered pages. However, when we compare the *History* to similar books of the period, we see that in its day it would have been considered concise. John Gardner Wilkinson's *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, published in 1837 and revised by Samuel Birch in 1878, was one of the earliest post-decipherment treatments of Egyptian history and society based on close observation of the Egyptian monuments. In its revised 1878 edition, it is a three-volume work of 1,553 total pages. Adolf Erman's *Aegypten und aegyptisches Leben im Altertum* was an 1885 two-volume work of over 700 pages (translated into a single-volume English edition – *Life in Ancient Egypt* – in 1894), and Eduard Meyer's *Geschichte des Alterthums*, published between 1884 and 1902, was five volumes of over 3,000 pages. Meyer wrote a shorter history in 1887 focusing only on the Egyptians – *Geschichte des alten Aegyptens* – but it was not translated into English for a wider audience. At the turn of the century, Petrie produced six volumes of *A History of Egypt* from 1898 to 1905; not to be outdone, E.A. Wallis Budge wrote *eight* volumes of *A History of Egypt from the End of the Neolithic Period to the Death of Cleopatra VII, B.C. 30*. One of the only brief treatments of Egyptian history was Mariette's 1867 *Aperçu de l'histoire ancienne d'Égypte* (published in English as *Outlines of Ancient Egyptian History*

in 1892), at 109 pages. As the title suggests, this work was meant only to be a brief sketch of Egyptian civilization.

In 1904, a year before Breasted's *History* was published, Percy Newberry and John Garstang attempted to condense the subject into less than 200 pages, producing *A Short History of Ancient Egypt*. It was considered by some to be too brief, receiving an unfavorable review in *The American Historical Review*, in which it was deemed that the authors were unable to outline the essential characteristics of Egyptian history with precision, exhibiting "a painful lack of proper proportion" (Ferguson 1905: 843). One year later, Breasted's *History* seemed to strike the right note with the majority of reviewers.<sup>3</sup> Seen against the backdrop of the aforementioned books, his book was noted by reviewers for being a single volume treatment of a complex subject, aimed at a wide audience. It was praised for being more accessible to the non-specialist than Petrie's and Budge's histories (Müller 1906: 866)<sup>4</sup> and for being the first example of an English history that managed to be broad, comparative, and precise within one volume (Giddings 1906: 529): detailed, but never prolix (Johnston 1907: 235).

It was not only in length that Breasted's book differed from those that had come before. His was organized chronologically and without the heavy use of subject headings at the opening of each chapter. In contrast, Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs* and Erman's *Life in Ancient Egypt* were both arranged topically, rather than chronologically, and attempted to cover every facet of Egyptian life that could be discussed based on the extant material. A representative chapter from Wilkinson begins by listing the following

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter, research material includes 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century newspaper and magazine articles. References to articles for which no author is known are listed in footnotes, rather than in the bibliography at the end of this work.

<sup>4</sup> Also "History, Biography, and Topography", *The Methodist Review*, May 1906.

subject headings: vases, boxes, parties, dinner, guests, dancing, games, dwarfs, wrestling. Erman follows the same pattern, with chapter headings covering everything from “men’s coiffure under the old and new empire” to “peculiarities of Egyptian carpenters’ work”. Aside from the obvious fact that Wilkinson and Erman were focusing on Egyptian life, rather than chronological history, the consequence of such extensive and topical organization of information is that ancient Egypt was presented as a catalogue of exotic characteristics – a listing of traits that need not be read in any particular order. Even Petrie’s *History of Egypt* – the title of which implies a synthesis and narrative account – did not quite fit the bill; as two reviewers noted, it was hardly a history but rather an index of historical monuments, lacking a connecting narrative (Price 1906: 15).<sup>5</sup>

### **III. A New Egyptology**

Breasted’s vision for what history and Egyptology should be was entirely different from these predecessors. I noted in the Introduction (pg. 12) that throughout his career he was a proponent of a “history as science” paradigm. Interestingly, it is his contemporary, W.M. Flinders Petrie, who is consistently cited as the father of scientific Egyptology in most all introductory books on Egypt. There are several factors that determine this attitude on the part of modern scholars and, as I will demonstrate below, there is a basis for reinstating Breasted amongst the founding figures of scientific Egyptology in our narratives of the discipline’s history.

Mariette, Petrie and George Reisner have become standard references in summaries of Egyptology’s development, as discussed in Chapter 1 (pg. 20). Breasted, however, is less frequently noted; when he is mentioned, it is usually in reference to his founding of the Oriental Institute. This imbalance is partly due to the “narrative of

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<sup>5</sup> Also “New Books”, *The Manchester Guardian*, 6 October 1908.

discovery” that guides the telling of Egyptology’s history (see Chapter 1, pp. 29-30), in which archaeologists and explorers, rather than writers and philologists, become the dominant figures in the story of Egypt’s rediscovery.<sup>6</sup> As noted in Chapter 2, the entire field of Egyptology has been perceived by some as theoretically unengaged. It can also be argued that, within the discipline, historians in particular receive short shrift in terms of their contributions to the developing sophistication of Egyptology. Donald Redford maintains that “Of all the subdisciplines into which Egyptology is divided, history (and history writing) has long had to suffer the status of poor cousin” (Redford 2003: 1). A concrete and recent example of this de-emphasis on history is in Rosalie David’s *The Experience of Ancient Egypt* (2000). The second half of the book is devoted to tracing the development of Egyptology under such headings as “recording the monuments” and “excavating the sites”. Historians such as Breasted are not included here; instead, Egyptian historiography is summarized in one and half pages and appended to the end of the first chapter on ancient chronologies.<sup>7</sup>

Redford attributes this general bias to the derision of mainstream historians who see Egyptologists as primarily engaged in political, event-driven history, with little theoretical savvy. He does not deny that this has indeed been a preoccupation of Egyptological historians, but he also points out that since the late 1960s, other historical trends have found their way into studies of Egypt, from economic history to microhistory (ibid. 2-3). Ultimately, he defends the cause of “old-fashioned” event history on the grounds that history is unique, unrepeatable, and not subject to explanation via scientific

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<sup>6</sup> The exception is Jean-François Champollion, perhaps the only philological figure in Egyptology’s history whose “discovery” was of such magnitude that it stands alongside Howard Carter and Tutankhamen’s tomb in the popular imagination.

<sup>7</sup> To be fair, David’s specialty is palaeopathology and she naturally emphasizes the physical sciences. However, this is a reflection of a larger trend of omission (see Chapter 2, pg. 49).

laws of behavior (ibid. 7). Putting aside the big questions of what history should be or how it should be done – questions that drive the entire subfield of historical theory – I would add another element to Redford’s defense of history. Part of the reason that historians, and particularly those of Breasted’s era, are overlooked in Egyptology’s history is due to the notion that both archaeology and history were largely atheoretical prior to the 1960s. Archaeologists such as Petrie and Reisner are lauded for their field *methodologies* – seriation, photography, stratigraphic profiles – but attention is less often given to the explanations of social change that were current in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> Historians, whose methodologies were and still are less visible than those of archaeologists, are accorded little value in the narrative of Egyptology’s progress from antiquarianism to scientific enquiry. The implicit message is that explanations of social change – that level of discourse which resides at a higher realm than data acquisition and its attendant methodologies – were negligible prior to the New Archaeology (and New History) that emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. All which came before was uncritical and unsophisticated, mere “description” – a preeminently negative word in the charged vocabulary of processualist thought.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the fervor of the processualist movement – rejecting the descriptive, supposedly atheoretical tendencies of previous scholars – as well as the postmodern trendiness that characterizes much of postprocessualist thought, has marginalized the perceived value of early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship. Hence, Breasted is

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<sup>8</sup> The work of Bruce Trigger (1980; 1989; 1995) is a notable exception, particularly with regard to Egyptology. I will elaborate on this point later in the chapter when the discussion turns to Breasted’s explanations of social change in Egypt.

<sup>9</sup> As Matthew Johnston notes: “Some historians of archaeology maintain that the century before 1960 was the ‘long sleep’ of archaeological theory, in which very little explicit discussion of theory took place” (Johnston 1999: 15).

celebrated as an administrator and as a pioneer in the dangerous post-War Middle East (see pg. 63 above), but his actual claims about the past – how Egyptian society functioned and why it changed in the ways that it did – are left in the nebulous category of “traditional” (read: uncritical) history. Partly this is due to the currently unfashionable nature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas of social change, and partly due to the general lack of acknowledgment that some of the tenets of postprocessualist thought, such as the role of the individual and agency, are much older concerns that were debated long before Ian Hodder and his cohorts came on the scene. As I will demonstrate below, Breasted’s work was far from being straightforward political history and culture description. He had very clearly articulated ideas of how historical research should be done and his explanations of social change, though their underpinnings were not as explicitly stated as his methodologies, were far from isolated from the wider world of archaeology and anthropology in his day.

### **A. History as Science**

Breasted came to Egyptology out of dissatisfaction with his intention to be a minister. In 1887, he began studying Hebrew at the Chicago Theological Institute and, after two years, declared that “I could never be satisfied to preach on the basis of texts I know to be full of mistranslations” (*Pioneer* 22). Because of his skill in Hebrew, he was encouraged to continue his education as an Orientalist under William Rainey Harper at Yale. Harper, who would go on to become the first president of the University of Chicago, promised Breasted that if he went to Germany to acquire the “best possible scientific equipment” – i.e., a PhD under Adolf Erman at the University of Berlin – Harper would award him the first American professorship in Egyptology (*ibid.* 30). In

1891, he matriculated as a doctoral student in Berlin, completing his degree in the summer of 1894 with a thesis (in Latin) on the hymns of Akhenaten and oral examinations on ancient Egyptian language, Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek philosophy.

Already in his early student days (from 1891-1892) Breasted was forming opinions about effective education and the proper methods of research. He felt that the structure of German education was unsystematic, the resources for studying Egyptian language inadequate, and the students' attitudes passive:

I am ready to affirm that their [German universities'] great reputation is built up entirely by their *individual scholars*. Their methods as they affect the ordinary students, are simply abominable....The *only* Hieroglyphic Grammar I have is a volume of lighting notes taken last semester....The German students are glad to attend [lectures], for they know no other way of acquiring knowledge: most of them are simply jugs into which the professors are continually pouring information at a stupendous rate (*Pioneer* 41).<sup>10</sup>

His opinion of the state of Egyptology in Britain was even lower. Upon visiting the British Museum for the first time in 1895, he berated E.A. Wallis Budge for the numerous mistakes on the museum labels and in his correspondence home referred to Budge as a "pudgy, logy, soggy-faced" man who wrote books full of egregious errors (*Pioneer* 85). In Breasted's estimation, the only man in Britain truly capable of reading Egyptian was Francis Llewelyn Griffith (*ibid.*).

As a student, the process of learning Egyptian language also instilled in Breasted an appreciation and commitment to meticulous research: "I begin to see that it is not so much the comprehensiveness of a man's *learning*, as his rational and careful method, which will bring reliable results, and I am very sure I *have* such a method" (*Pioneer* 48).

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<sup>10</sup>In his correspondence Breasted very often underlined words, rendered here as italics. Unless it is specifically noted that emphasis has been added, all italics in the content from Breasted's correspondence reflects his original emphasis.



These excerpts from Breasted's correspondence illustrate how early it was in his development as a scholar that he formulated three concerns which would remain with him throughout his career: the urgent need for a scientific method of historical analysis; the awareness that although Germany was the acknowledged center for such analysis, it was nevertheless lacking in its approach to education;<sup>11</sup> and the strong sense that America needed to catch up to Continental Europe in terms of its production of scientific knowledge. He wasted no time in addressing the first of these concerns: in 1896, while he was serving as an Instructor of Egyptology at the University of Chicago, he began collecting transcribed copies of Egyptian historical records and producing his own translations of them. In 1899 he was invited by the Prussian Academy of Sciences to copy all of the Egyptian inscriptions in the museum collections of Europe for the purpose of gathering data for Adolf Erman's Egyptian Dictionary (*Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*). From 1899 to 1903, Breasted traveled Europe copying and translating inscriptions; it was this opportunity that provided much of the information later published in *Ancient Records of Egypt*.

That Breasted was explicitly advocating for a new Egyptology – a scientific Egyptology, indebted to German forbearers but surpassing them in exactitude – is apparent from the opening pages of the *History*, as well as from his personal correspondence. He criticizes the current inadequacies of published hieroglyphic documents, adding that Egyptology lags behind other fields in its continued propagation

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<sup>11</sup> Breasted makes repeated reference in his correspondence to the inadequacies of German education and even of the German intellectual spirit. As he toured Cambridge and Oxford, he reflected that they symbolized “the rich Classical learning, the cultural opportunities and civilizing influences, the intellectual peace and security I had read and dreamed about, but never experienced. . . . For here was something I had not found in Germany” (*Pioneer* 86). In academic print, however, he noted the advancements in German methodology, praising Erman for the exactitude which produced the first “scientific grammar” of ancient Egyptian language (Breasted 1893a).

of inaccurately copied inscriptions (*HE* ix).<sup>12</sup> In later years, his science-inflected vocabulary would equate the Oriental Institute to a laboratory for the study of mankind (Breasted 1928); here, he speaks of the historical *workshop* and its attendant debris – the copies, translations, and commentaries on the 1,029 inscriptions and texts that comprise the first four volumes of *Ancient Records*. The preface to the *History* uniquely reveals the motives of a relatively young scholar making his first lengthy and popular declaration to the English-speaking public: history is based, first and foremost, on *firsthand* recording and translation of extant texts; that the methods used to acquire solid transcriptions and translations are the basic toolkit of the conscientious historian; and that the final narrative – in order to include a non-specialist audience – must represent a careful balance between the transparency of the workshop debris and the interpretive mind of the author. *Ancient Records of Egypt* was published almost in tandem with *A History of Egypt* precisely so that the sources behind the statements (the “laboratory note-book” [HE 215]) could be consulted by the wider audience. Breasted felt it was equally important, however, to maintain a narrative flow free from detailed references; hence, the texts were published separately and the audience was free to choose their level of engagement with the sources. By separating source material and narrative – but publishing both – Breasted developed a mode of history-writing in Egyptology that functioned as both story and science. The result was *literary science*, reflecting Breasted’s intentions as well as the book’s reception by the public.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> All references to Breasted’s 1905 *A History of Egypt* are hereafter abbreviated as HE.

<sup>13</sup> In another departure from the work of his mentor Erman, Breasted used primarily photographs, rather than line drawings or woodcuts, to illustrate his text. Some were photographs taken by Breasted himself and many were taken from *Egypt through the Stereoscope: A Journey through the Land of the Pharaohs* (1905), a project of Underwood & Underwood publishers in New York, for which Breasted provided the text to accompany the images. His interest in photographing monuments and inscriptions *in situ* long predated his aerial mission in 1920, the fruits of which form the foundation of the Oriental Institute’s

In letters to his mother, written during his long sojourn of copying museum inscriptions in Europe, we can discern his awareness of the path he sought to forge in American academia.<sup>14</sup> Years later, after the Oriental Institute was well established, Breasted would vehemently defend the need of scholars in the humanities to be provided with permanent funding and a research infrastructure comparable to those in the physical sciences: “The customary ‘sabbatical year’, which permitted the orientalist a few brief months of wandering in the Orient with a pocket note-book in his hand would have been ludicrous had it not also been so pathetically futile” (Breasted 1928: 517). We can trace the origins of this conviction – a conviction that would lead not only to his success as an administrator, but also to the shaping of American Egyptology – to his time in Europe as he prepared to write *A History of Egypt*. As of the early 1900s, his position at the University of Chicago was still quite tenuous. His salary (which had begun at \$800 per year in 1895) was barely enough to support his family, and the position with the Prussian Academy from 1899-1903 carried no salary beyond living expenses (C. Breasted 1943: 102). And yet his ambitions were high, not only for himself, but for the advancement of American Egyptology. That he was aware of America’s status as a lesser contributor to the field, and that he wanted to be instrumental in changing it, is indicated by his correspondence. In 1903 he wrote from Berlin,

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Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes (Bonn-Muller 2010). In 1902, he expressed his interest in archaeological photography to George Ellery Hale, who promised to follow up on it at the Carnegie Institute of Science (JHB to George Ellery Hale, July 25, 1902, James H. Breasted Papers, George Ellery Hale Correspondence, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago).

<sup>14</sup> The relationship between history and science is a recurring theme in Breasted’s correspondence with his friend George Ellery Hale. Although they were in communication as early as 1896, their correspondence did not become lengthy and frequent until 1913, increasing in intensity over the next twenty years as they grew to be close friends. As this chapter is concerned with the early development of Breasted’s work and philosophy, his communication with Hale will be addressed in subsequent chapters that focus on later stages of his career.

They [German scholars] spoke of recent American work in science in the highest terms, and it was very gratifying to find that we are no longer regarded as successful pork-packers and lumberman only. I do not look down upon any industry but where a nation has nothing else, it becomes the legitimate but of more highly developed peoples.<sup>15</sup>

His letters often make fun of his own rural Midwestern background, but they point to a deeper feeling that America had, on the one hand, a long way to come in order to achieve a scientific rapprochement with Europe, but also that America had the potential to be a new and better arena for humanistic science. He jokingly refers to his relatives back in Illinois as green and rustic, with hay-seed in their eyes and incomprehension at the academic discoveries occurring in Berlin<sup>16</sup>; he teases his mother for finally moving into a house with electric lights after she had adamantly refused.<sup>17</sup> He was sometimes bothered by doubts about his claim to a place amongst the German historians who formed his academic circle in Berlin.<sup>18</sup> Yet, he believed in the ability of a self-made man – which is how he referred to himself<sup>19</sup> – to achieve academic standing and prestige, while also realizing that in Europe the old ways of doing things still prevailed: in 1907, while on a leave of absence from the University of Chicago, Breasted turned down the offer of a faculty position in Heidelberg in part because the nominal salary (\$500) was a remnant of the time when academia was the privilege of the

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<sup>15</sup> JHB to his mother, December 13, 1903, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>16</sup> JHB to his mother, March 27, 1904, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>17</sup> JHB to his mother, June 6, 1897, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>18</sup> JHB to his mother, November 25, 1907, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>19</sup> JHB to his mother, December 20, 1903, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

independently wealthy. He notes that it will be years before Germany sees a change in this status quo.<sup>20</sup>

While looking to Continental Europe, and particularly Germany, as the center for research, he also perceived it as flawed and hoped to introduce a better form of science – what I call his literary science – to the American public. As early as the summer of 1900, when he was already planning but had not yet started writing the *History*, he insisted that he would not borrow from the work of his German predecessors. He would instead find out “to the last jot and title, *what the monuments say*” (*Pioneer* 104). By 1903 he was confident that he commanded a surpassing knowledge of the historical inscriptions: “I have done more work on the Egyptian historical documents than any man in Europe and I am not going to dish it up in a little two for a cent textbook to suit any publisher alive”.<sup>21</sup> He combined rigorous textual research with a commitment to producing eloquent prose, struggling to find a compositional style that served both popular and scientific interests.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, it was Breasted himself who would transform the status quo he had observed in Europe by convincing those who had money – members of the lay public for whom he intended his *History* – that the study of the ancient Near Eastern past was crucial to understanding their own place in Western civilization, a point to which I will return below.

Another element of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century likely influenced Breasted’s emphasis on scientific method. The tendency to view ancient Egypt through the lens of the exotic is

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<sup>20</sup> JHB to his mother, November 25, 1907, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>21</sup> JHB to his mother, November 8, 1903, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>22</sup> JHB to his mother, November 29, 1903, James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

not a phenomenon unique to contemporary pop culture. In the first years of the 1900s, before the discovery of the Nefertiti bust and Tutankhamen's tomb, Egyptomania in the visual and performing arts was already established and informing the emerging medium of cinema.<sup>23</sup> Stuart Tyson Smith (2007) traces the theme of resurrected mummies and curses to over a hundred years before the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922. The first mummy *film* dates to 1899 (*Cléopâtre*), and was followed by two dozen more in the next twenty years. In addition to Egypt in the visual arts, this period also saw the popularity of ancient Egyptian religion in such mystical institutions as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (Pinch 2004: 12). Looking back on the mid-late 1890s, Breasted wrote "Egyptology was then commonly regarded by the public and the press as something bizarre, an oddity at a county fair, a fakir's imposition upon general credulity. . . . I must dispel a thousand superstitions and misapprehensions about antiquity in general and Egypt in particular" (*Pioneer* 96).

I have outlined above the various factors that influenced Breasted's self-proclaimed scientific approach as it emerged early in his career. A recent article by David Gange (2006), "Religion and Science in Late Nineteenth-Century British Egyptology", advances the thesis that the developments in scientific method in this period were motivated by spiritual, rather than scientific, objectives and traditional biblical approaches were the foundation of Egyptological research. I will offer some remarks on this thesis as it relates to Breasted and the research agenda that he was forging in the early 1900s.

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<sup>23</sup> See Bickerstaffe 2008, Dudley 1923, and Antonia Lant's (1992) fascinating article on Egypt's role in 19<sup>th</sup> century lantern shows, panoramas, photographs, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century cinema: "There was an association between the blackened enclosure of silent cinema and that of the Egyptian tomb...a perception of cinema as necropolis, its projections mysterious and cursed, issuing a warning to spectators" (Lant 1992: 90).

Gange's argument builds from the following:

I aim to show that the development [of archaeology and Egyptology] was not always towards self-professed 'scientific' objectivity as scholars have assumed: that the new techniques put to use in the Near East at this time were often developed to fulfill roles that today seem remarkably unscientific, relating primarily to spiritual issues. . . . the major ideological drive of the Egyptologists of this period was not either of those usually assigned to them by scholars: rather than being racists obsessed with proving white superiority and discrediting historical African achievements, or scientists chasing down scientific truth, they were – just like Layard and Botta – first and foremost Christians attempting to tie archaeological records into Old Testament history. (Gange 2006: 1084)

He cites the activities of Britain's Egypt Exploration Fund (founded in 1882) as a prime example of this agenda: its patron Amelia Edwards made "emphatically biblical" funding appeals to the public and its affiliated archaeologists – such as Flinders Petrie and Eduoard Naville – conducted excavations intended to support the accuracy of biblical events. The organization was, according to Gange, conceived as a missionary endeavor to counter the claims of evolutionary scientists and biblical critics (ibid. 1086-1087). He then expands this general trend to encompass the views and writings of the majority of British Egyptologists in the final two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "late nineteenth-century approaches to Egypt were almost always spiritually charged: at the centre of their endeavor was an attempt to infuse evolution with spiritual ideas, in short, to re-enchant the evolutionary world" (ibid. 1099). Gange sets up a dichotomy between biblical Egyptologists (the dominant force) and non-biblical Egyptologists, of whom Samuel Birch is cited as the primary example. His conclusion is that few of the famous archaeologists from the 1880s to the first decade of the 1900s actually sought to investigate social development or change in Egypt; rather, they were attempting to prove an existing and deeply held religious belief (ibid. 1096, 1099-1102).

That Breasted was an American trained in Germany could be grounds for considering him outside the scope of this article; however, Gange includes Breasted in his discussion of Egyptologists' biblically-inspired reactions to the finds at Amarna in this period. He maintains that Egyptologists saw Akhenaten's religious revolution as confirmation that "Egyptian civilization maintained some memory of an antediluvian civilization that was initially harmonious, godly, and glorious" (ibid. 1094), categorizing Breasted as one of the influential originators of this mode of thought (ibid. 1095).

The first issue to be addressed is Gange's claims that interest in "spiritual issues" is tied to an unscientific approach, and that early Egyptologists who professed such interests stood in opposition to evolutionary science.<sup>24</sup> The question of whether or not religion and spiritual ideas can be studied scientifically is, in fact, immaterial to the analysis, as the concern here is whether late 19<sup>th</sup> century Egyptology was indeed advanced by goals that were rooted in proving the veracity of the Bible and finding evidence of a Christian trajectory in pre-Christian antiquity, as Gange claims. However, Gange appears to operate on the *a priori* assumption that concern with the spiritual is unscientific and therefore at odds with the narrative of scientific advancement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; thus, Egyptologists who concerned themselves with religious development were not seeking explanations of social change, but rather trying to prove that society changed in accordance with established biblical traditions. It appears that in Gange's view, science and religion, evolution and spiritual issues, are mutually exclusive categories. This results in a dichotomy between biblical and non-biblical Egyptologists which, though a defensible position for the state of British Egyptology, is overly

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<sup>24</sup> Or, when they did invoke evolutionary process, it was for the purpose of demonstrating that there existed a pre-flood, enlightened civilization inspired by the Christian God (Gange 2006: 1095).



simplistic when applied to the mode in which Breasted was working. As will be demonstrated below, Breasted was both deeply interested in spiritual development over time, *and* deeply committed to explaining the evolution of mankind in a manner influenced by the geological and evolutionary sciences. The separation between religion and science may seem self-evident to some in our contemporary society, but to impose this modern perspective on scholars of the past creates a false dichotomy between what is scientific and unscientific with regard to how those scholars perceived their work.

That biblical history did guide Egyptological research is accurate, and Petrie did sometimes write explicitly within this framework.<sup>25</sup> Setting aside the weaknesses in Gange's argument outlined above, the article does demonstrate the degree to which funding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century depended on generating public interest through evoking the Bible. In fact, the degree to which these preoccupations influenced Egyptology in the English-speaking world highlights the argument that Breasted diverged from the work of his contemporaries and predecessors. Early in his career, he frequently wrote articles on aspects of Egyptian religion and their relation to Israel,<sup>26</sup> both for academic journals and the more popularly oriented *The Biblical World*, but contrary to the image of British Egyptology presented by Gange, his work did not seek to verify biblical tradition. On the contrary, Breasted acknowledged the conflict amongst scholars and explicitly criticized those using, as he perceived them, spurious arguments to bolster biblical claims to historical truth. In presenting a philological examination of the Merenptah (or "Israel") Stele, he states:

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<sup>25</sup> His 1911 work *Egypt and Israel* dealt largely with Biblical narratives and was published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>26</sup> Given Breasted's linguistic training, many of these articles were philological studies; for example, "The Order of the Sentence in the Hebrew Portions of Daniel" (1891); "The Israel Tablet" (1897); and "The Earliest Occurrence of the Name of Abram" (1904).

In the *Contemporary Review* of last November we find Mr. Sayce setting the biblical critics and the archaeologists over against each other in two hostile camps; then taking his stand as the spokesman of the latter he shows how archaeology is upsetting the results of biblical criticism. If the article in the *Homiletic Review* is an example of the method by which the critic is to be routed he has very little to fear, and we take occasion to add that so far as the archaeology of Egypt is concerned it has very strikingly confirmed the general results of Old Testament *criticism*. (Breasted 1897: 67; emphasis added)

In observing textual similarities between Egyptian and Hebrew sources – such as the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* and chapters in Isaiah and the minor prophets – Breasted does not see the workings of Christian revelation, but rather evidence that moral and ethical reflection existed for centuries prior to the Hebrew texts. The emergence of these latter texts was partially a result of *literary* and *social* influence from Egypt (Breasted 1910a: 116).<sup>27</sup>

Rather than argue for the purity of Egypt's earlier religion as a remnant of antediluvian civilization, as did some scholars noted by Gange, Breasted argued exactly the opposite. Thus, Predynastic religion was a “polytheism of innumerable gods” with little ethical influence and no conception of a universal god (Breasted 1907: 427; also HE 53-54, 64). He did see in Akhenaten's Atenism the earliest form of monotheism, but he argued that this was the result of *social evolution*: with the expansion of the Egyptian empire in the early New Kingdom came the understanding of extending the dominion of Amen. “It was thus a small step from the world-idea to the world-god” (ibid. 427). It was political, economic, and military forces that brought about gradual religious change (HE 356-359; Breasted 1910b: 441).

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<sup>27</sup> i.e., Breasted did *not* explain Egyptian religion from a Christian triumphalist perspective, in which human history is perceived to have unfolded according to the workings of a superior Christian trajectory – a perspective that Gange identifies as characteristic of 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptology.

In the *History*, Breasted acknowledged that his intended audience included students of the Old Testament who may be interested in the history of Egypt (*HE* viii). This small statement is the extent to which he addresses this portion of his audience; he makes no claims to addressing larger issues of biblical significance. Scattered references to the Hebrew Bible occur sporadically throughout the text. For periods earlier than the Late Period, the references are perfunctory, added to the text in order to remind the reader that this was the historical context that the Hebrew Bible purported to relate. Thus, after a chapter narrating the final expulsion of the Hyksos under Ahmose and in which the agricultural land of Egypt comes under control of the pharaoh, Breasted adds a final line: “It is this state of affairs which in Hebrew tradition was represented as the direct result of Joseph’s sagacity” (*HE* 229). This cautious statement, claiming only that Hebrew tradition *represented* Egypt in this way, is largely characteristic of Breasted’s approach to biblical sources.<sup>28</sup> Reference to these sources increases in frequency only for the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period, during which time Egypt was involved in the complicated politics of the eastern Mediterranean. The books of Nahum, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are used in isolated instances as context for the internal turmoil of Egypt in this period (*HE* 582, 584, 595).

Breasted maintained that all texts, religious or otherwise, should be analyzed according to “scientific” principles. Based on his practice, this methodology included

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<sup>28</sup> Breasted mentions the existence of the “Hebrew monarchies” in passing, but without attributing any particular significance to them (*HE* 262); with regard to the biblical tradition of Israelite oppression in Egypt, he maintains that it is not unreasonable for a tribe of their ancestors to have been pressed into manual labor and that fleeing such labor would have been characteristic of the period in general (*HE* 446-447); in discussing the mummy of Merenptah, he notes the discomfort of those people who would prefer that his body had been found at the bottom of the Red Sea (*HE* 472); and with a touch of irony he denies the need for the Hebrew prophets to have used literal prophecy in foreseeing the end of Egyptian civilization, as Egypt’s weakened state and inept foreign relations in the Third Intermediate Period was obvious to any political observer (*HE* 536).

meticulous (and often comparative) linguistic analysis from the original texts, if possible, and a knowledge of all phases of Egyptian language as well as the major Semitic languages (Arabic, classical Hebrew, and Assyrian). This approach is discernible in his earliest academic writing. His doctoral thesis, *De Hymnis in Solem sub Rege Amenophide IV conceptis* (1894; “On the hymns to the sun composed under king Amenhotep IV”), was a study of the Hymn to the Aten in which he produced a translation and commentary on the text. Three of the four oral examination questions that followed his presentation of the thesis were focused on comparative philology: comparison between Egyptian, Arabic, and Hebrew participles; the syntax of the Hebrew book of Daniel; and the relationship of the Egyptian preposition *mj* to Semitic languages.<sup>29</sup> He admired such rigorous exactitude (see Breasted 1893) on the part of German scholars, but also saw it as potentially limiting if it were allowed to fill one’s entire vision: “at least it can never be laid at my door that I taught and studied the ancient languages as an end in themselves, forgetting that they are merely a means of recovering the content and significance of ancient human life for us of today” (*Pioneer* 354).

The point I have elaborated thus far, that Breasted believed in the possibility of a scientific Egyptology and worked to establish the principles of such an approach, should not be seen as an implicit endorsement of the history as science paradigm. If, or to what degree, the past can be studied empirically, objectively, or quantitatively is a question that has occupied the most active minds in anthropological and historical theory for over a century. It is not the purpose of this work to “prove” or “disprove” the accuracy of Breasted’s claims about ancient Egypt. Rather, I aim to demonstrate that interpretations

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<sup>29</sup> I am indebted to Terry Wilfong for explanatory notes on Breasted’s dissertation and the translation of the oral examination questions from the Latin.

of the past arise out of the cultural context of the interpreters and are irrevocably rooted in this context. Thus, right and wrong are rendered culturally contingent.

The overarching question under investigation here is the following: what did Breasted believe to be correct about the past, and why? Specifically, what were the societal forces and specific circumstances that influenced his approach? To begin answering this question, I elaborated in the above section three main themes characterizing Breasted's early career: 1) he was advocating for a new kind of scientific Egyptology from the earliest stages of his professional training; 2) numerous factors influenced his conviction that an improved methodology and new academic infrastructure were called for, perhaps foremost of which was his intention to not only bring American Egyptology into the European arena, but also to improve upon those flaws which he perceived in Europe; and 3) the conflict between religion and evolutionary science was one that Breasted was able to neutralize in his own work because his approach was indebted to the concerns of both Oriental studies and evolutionary, anthropological science.

It is this last point that informs the following section. The question that needs to be addressed is: to what degree were Breasted's claims about social change in *A History of Egypt* engaged with larger concerns and approaches in archaeology? Is it legitimate to view Breasted as a seminal figure in Egyptology's history of explaining social change, rather than as engaged only in descriptive political history?

#### **IV. Society and Change in *A History of Egypt***

In 1997, Robert Wenke identified explanations of cultural change as the "classic point of divide" between humanities and social science disciplines: where most

Egyptologists would explain cultural change in terms of unique historical events or individuals, anthropologists would see general trends that characterize the development of many societies at comparable levels of technological development (Wenke 1997: 117). However, Bruce Trigger (1995: 30-31) traced an interface between anthropology and Egyptology back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when cultural evolutionism, inspired by Darwin's ideas of biological evolution, was an influential factor in the American intellectual imagination. Though he acknowledges that both Breasted and George Reisner incorporated evolutionary perspectives into their work, he maintains that

Despite their acceptance of an evolutionary perspective, most Egyptologists found little use for a comparative anthropological approach as a basis for understanding ancient Egyptian civilization. They were inhibited from doing so by their conviction, derived from traditional German humanism, that the ancient Egyptians had played a unique and major role in the development of Western civilization. . . . Even when evolutionism exerted a powerful influence on Western thought, Egyptologists so greatly admired the ancient Egyptians' cultural achievements that they minimized the differences between ancient Egypt and the modern world. (Trigger 1995: 31, 33).

This conclusion provides a useful starting point from which to discuss Breasted's treatment of cultural change in *A History of Egypt*. Trigger, though admittedly working within the constraints of a brief article, over-generalizes in his statement. The "modern world" is not a monolith against which ancient Egypt can be compared or contrasted. Early Egyptologists drew different degrees of connection or disconnection between aspects of ancient Egypt and *multiple* worlds: the modern Orient as it was for them in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which entailed Egypt under British rule; the previous periods of the Ottoman Empire, the Mamluks, and the Fatimid Caliphate, with their associations of exoticism and barbarism; and the modern West, as they viewed it through their own cultural and national lenses. Breasted's work in particular is not easily pigeonholed into

any one approach or mode of analysis – he combines a concern for social evolution with the role of the individual in influencing historical trajectory; he alternately emphasizes languid exoticism and practical industriousness, constructing a narrative that frequently shifts between “Oriental” and “Western” tropes.

### **A. Evolution and Diffusion**

As previously discussed, Egyptologists carry a reputation for being steeped in historical particularism and isolated from the larger trends in anthropological and archaeological theory. For early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars this stereotype is even more persistent. The emergence in the 1960s of new schools of historical and archaeological thought – characterized by strident and sometimes confrontational rhetoric<sup>30</sup> – caused much of the previous work to be labeled as “traditional”, or simply naïve.<sup>31</sup> It is more accurate to say that the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period in which the conceptual underpinnings of research and explanation were not always explicit and rarely articulated as theory; however, this does not render the era atheoretical. Breasted does not open the *History* with an abstract discussion of diffusionist explanations of social change, yet his indebtedness to this approach is apparent. Before continuing with this point, it is necessary to sketch a brief outline of the intellectual milieu in which Breasted produced his early work.

An evolutionary view of human history emerged as early as the Renaissance (Johnson 1999: 132), though in its more modern form it is often traced to the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was tied to a belief in the essential psychic unity of

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<sup>30</sup> Processualists and postprocessualists alike use aggressive tactics: see Binford 1983: 17-18 for a lively description of “social philosophers” ambushing the representative of scientific epistemology (i.e., Binford) at an academic symposium.

<sup>31</sup> See Renfrew 1983: 9, in which he notes that earlier archaeologists such as Walter Taylor and V. Gordon Childe believed they had discovered a set of rules by which one could simply “do” archaeology.

humanity: all groups were capable of progressing through universal phases of technological and social development (Trigger 1989: 56-58; Thomas 2004: 28-31). In this view of the world, rational thought and reason would eventually triumph over superstition and ignorance. In 1871, Charles Darwin merged biological and social evolution in *Descent of Man*; he identified the struggle for survival as the key to social evolution (Harris 1968: 120). According to Darwin, natural selection gradually perfects human intellectual capacity, such that “from the remotest times successful tribes have supplanted other tribes. . . . At the present day civilized nations are everywhere supplanting barbarous nations” (quoted in Harris 1968: 121). However, it was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who made the greater contribution to theories of social evolution and survival of the fittest, despite the moniker “social *Darwinism*”.<sup>32</sup> Spencer argued that human progress was not merely technological, but also moral; thus, the “civilized” West had advanced beyond “savagery” (Johnson 1999: 134). Though we might view this today as obvious ethnocentrism and a philosophy that conveniently mandates colonialism, the ideas of Spencer and Darwin were rooted in the state of the natural sciences in their time, and therefore clothed in scientific legitimacy.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the negative effects of the industrial revolution – slums, child labor, factory-induced illnesses, etc. – became apparent, the optimistic belief in the capacity of humans to progress toward utopia was on the wane. In a reaction against unilinear cultural evolution, humans were now regarded as inherently static. Social change was largely the result of diffusion and migration, and such processes of change were unpredictable. Cultures now had to be described based on their unique

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<sup>32</sup> See Harris (1968: 122-125): Spencer published his ideas on the evolution of human nature prior to Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, though Darwin’s name became linked in the public consciousness with evolution in general.



features and historical trajectories, rather than on universally applicable rules of evolution (Johnson 1999: 142; Thomas 2004: 29, 64; Trigger 1989: 150-154). Breasted's contemporary, Grafton Elliot Smith, was described at the time of his death in the late 1930s as the leader of the diffusionist school of cultural anthropologists (J. T. Wilson 1938: 328). Smith began his scientific career studying Australian marsupials but shifted to human anatomy after transferring to the Government Medical School in Cairo, where he studied Egyptian royal mummies and Nubian remains threatened by the proposed Aswan dam (Todd 1937: 524-525). He was a recognized advocate of diffusionist explanations for the rise of civilization throughout the world, finding similarities between, amongst other things, the mummification techniques used by ancient Egyptians and indigenous Australians. By 1916, his evidence was considered sufficient to convince others in the scientific community that migration was the main force in creating similarities in human culture; with this principle firmly established, the task of anthropologists was to determine exactly how and when migration occurred (Rivers 1916: 462). This latter point led to the emphasis on historical particularism and the belief that certain cultures played uniquely special roles in human history: if invention and innovation were so rare as to occur only a handful of times in history, then the cultures responsible for those inventions were seen as the crucibles from which later civilizations developed.

Where, then, does Breasted fit in this intellectual setting? He is rarely, if ever, currently mentioned in the same breath as the anthropologists and archaeologists I noted above. In the history of anthropological theory, Herbert Spencer keeps company with Charles Lyell, Jean Baptiste Lamarck, and Darwin; the later figurehead of the diffusionist

and culture-historical approach, prehistorian V. Gordon Childe, mingles on the pages with Leslie White, Julian Steward, and Franz Boas. However, there is justification for introducing Breasted into the discussion of explanations of social change in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, though not as one who explicitly articulated theory. Rather, he is relevant for his concern with placing Egypt – and the Orient generally – into the larger stream of human progress, particularly as it led to European civilization, thereby applying notions of diffusion and evolution to the specific case of Egypt; in doing this for a popular audience, he was an important disseminator of these ideas.

It is interesting to note that when *A History of Egypt* was first published in 1905, it was received quite differently by W. Max Müller, a fellow Orientalist, than by Franklin Giddings, a sociologist and economist. Müller saw it as an eloquent rendering of Egyptian history, but faulted Breasted for being too eager to admire the Egyptians' achievements and cultural legacy, leading to incautious statements on their artistic and military capacities. The dearth of footnotes referencing works other than Breasted's own translations also irked Müller, who praises the book for its literary quality and ability to interest a wide audience, but finds it inadequate for a "scientific worker" (Müller 1906: 867-868). Giddings, on the other hand, perceived an entirely different value in the book. Writing for the *Political Science Quarterly*, he described Breasted's work as the following:

[A] product of comparative study and the scientific spirit. . . . The student of sociology would not waste his time who should read, in connection with his perusal of books [chapters] v and vi, Mr. Spencer's exposition of the evolution of political institutions, especially his chapters on political integration and "The Militant Type of Society." The real history of Egypt, as we now know it, is an exceedingly specific verification of Mr. Spencer's broad generalizations. (Giddings 1906: 530)

Thus, *A History of Egypt* was considered by some in the wider scientific community to be a contribution to evolutionary thought; for Giddings, the Old Kingdom read as a primitive kingdom similar to those throughout history, and the feudal quality of the Middle Kingdom was like that of feudal Europe and Japan (ibid. 530).

At the present time, a century removed from Giddings' praise of the evolutionary qualities in Breasted's work, we can discern a more complicated combination of theories in *A History of Egypt*. The following points will be illustrated below: Breasted's analysis exhibits elements of evolutionism as well as the diffusionist skepticism for the innovative capacities of mankind; and Egyptian society was progressing towards higher levels of civilization at the same time that it was fighting the inherent tendencies of stagnation and regression. Spencer maintained that progress was a necessity, not a historical accident; that as evil and immorality were overcome, "so surely must man become perfect" (quoted in Harris 1968: 125). Breasted was somewhat less utopian in his vision, focusing more on the ups and downs of humanity's ability to govern effectively against the forces of chaos and decentralization that were always threatening. Ultimately, however, he does uphold the Spencerian notion of intellectual fine-tuning over time when he points to the Classical mind as far superior to anything exhibited by the Egyptians in the realm of the intellect. An element which Giddings overlooked in his review, focused as he was on seeking comparative and sociological value in the *History*, is Breasted's negotiation of underlying social forces with the role of the individual – his attempt to reconcile gradual progress with historical contingency.

## B. Progress and Conservatism

Breasted implies his diffusionist views from the opening pages of the *History*. A recurring phrase is “the career of man”, and by this it is clear that he envisions a common thread of cultural evolution connecting European civilization – and by extension, all those Americans who are “the children of early Europe” – to the cultures of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates valleys (*HE* vii, 3). The influences of these cultures were diffused across the Mediterranean basin by the movements of various peoples, particularly in the first millennium BCE when Phoenician ships carried elements of Oriental civilization to southern Europe (262). Thus, Breasted finds the origins of European basilica and cathedral architecture in New Kingdom Theban temples (*HE* 344), and the form of Messianic prophecy developed in the Hebrew Bible was one already used by the Egyptians in Middle Kingdom didactic literature (*HE* 205).

Certain elements of Egyptian society were themselves the result of influences from the Levant; Breasted invokes the explanatory power of diffusion to explain characteristics which he believes were not an essential component of the Egyptian psyche. Thus, for the inherently “unwarlike” Egyptians, aggressive warfare was a trait diffused by the Hyksos during the Second Intermediate Period (*HE* 17; 233). It was not within the Egyptians’ capacity to make innovations contrary to their essential nature. It is here that we see tension between universal stages of evolution and the specificities of historical context. On the one hand, Egypt moved through stages of consolidation, feudalism, and empire – stages that can be observed in similar form in the histories of Europe and Asia – yet, Breasted sees portions of this development as unnatural to the Egyptian state. The “warlike spirit” that sustained the imperialism of the New Kingdom

was only temporary; in losing their control over Syria-Palestine in later generations, the Egyptians were actually returning to their “natural peacefulness” (*HE* 449).

This may appear to be an apologist’s attempt to justify the fall of the New Kingdom, or rationalize the brutalities attendant on imperial expansion by claiming they were contrary to Egyptian nature. However, it is more complex than apologia. At the same time that Breasted emphasizes the peaceful nature of the Egyptians, he uses this quality as an explanation for their inability to maintain sovereign control of their state – as evidence of *decay* – in the changing world of the late first millennium BCE. In the increasingly cosmopolitan setting of the eastern Mediterranean, imperial politics was a necessity, a fact of social evolution. Thus:

A burst of military enthusiasm and a line of able rulers had enabled Egypt to assume for several centuries an imperial position, which her unwarlike people were not by nature adapted to occupy; and their impotent descendants, no longer equal to their imperial role, were now appealing to the days of splendor with an almost pathetic futility. (*HE* 516)

The Egyptians were unable to adapt to this political reality; in effect, they could not keep up with the pace of human progress when it conflicted with their essential natures. In the context of a narrative that views imperial expansion as an inevitable function of advanced civilization – we should not forget that Breasted was living in an imperial age<sup>33</sup> – this characteristic of the Egyptians is portrayed as a negative attribute: mere preservation, rather than expansion, is equated with decay (*HE* 464). There are two contradictory motifs vying for position in Breasted’s writing: 1) the motif of the *peaceful, noble*

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<sup>33</sup> Breasted’s experience with modern imperialism is preserved in his correspondence. He was living in Berlin, and drafting *A History of Egypt*, when the Russo-Japanese war broke out in 1904. He was fascinated by what he perceived as the tremendous historical significance of the war: “The fate of a continent and the *supremacy of a race* is being decided every day. Already it is evident that whatever the eventual course of this war may be, Russian dominance in eastern Asia is gone. To future centuries looking back upon it, the triumph of the Japanese over the Russians will be as significant as that of the Greeks over the Persians at Salamis or Marathon” (*Pioneer* 126; emphasis added).

Egyptian unsuited to warfare, and 2) the *decay* and *decadence* of a government that could not maintain its imperial possessions due to this unsuitability. The negative light in which Egypt's withdrawal from Syria-Palestine is cast indicates that in Breasted's narrative, the integrity of the state is ultimately more important than the individual's tendency to resist warfare.

The relationship between progress and stagnation is a recurring theme throughout the *History*. Breasted's thought anticipates some of the elements that would become characteristic of the culture-historical approach and V. Gordon Childe's work. In *Man Makes Himself* (1951; originally published 1936), Childe maintains that humans are theoretically capable of innovation, but in practice resistant to cultural change: "The dead-weight of conservatism . . . has undoubtedly retarded human progress even more in the past than today. Nevertheless, for the human species progress has consisted essentially in the improvement and adjustment of social tradition, *transmitted by precept and example*" (Childe 1951: 31; emphasis added). Thus, Childe rejects biological evolution – which by the mid-1930s had become associated with Fascism (ibid. 9) – as a factor in human cultural progress, favoring instead the diffusion of traits across cultures and the capacity of people to choose which traits to accept into their cultural frameworks. *A History of Egypt* introduced, three decades prior to *Man Makes Himself*, several of these themes. For Breasted, the Egyptian was a "creature of habit" (HE 45), inclined to conservatism; Egypt as a society contended with the "almost irresistible inertia of tradition" (HE 351). The "dry bones of traditionalism" (HE 376) was a constant and underlying force affecting the rate and success of social change in ancient Egypt.

For substantial social change to occur in the face of inherent conservatism, Breasted credits two processes: diffusion/migration and individual initiative. The migration of Asiatic peoples into the Nile valley, and the eventual conquest by the Hyksos, did not simply introduce the horse and chariot into Egypt. In this movement of populations, and the interactions it stimulated, “the conservatism of millennia was broken up” (*HE* 17). Childe later echoes this very sentiment when he claims that the rigidity of established societies is broken down by invasion and immigration (Childe 1951: 105). For Childe, such changes are generally positive, as they lead to economic and technological revolutions. Breasted exhibits more ambivalence toward external forces of social change. We can, in fact, discern a shift in his attitude towards the imperialism of the New Kingdom as his own *History* unfolds before him. When writing of the early New Kingdom, he praises the military power and administrative efficiency that enabled Egypt to control – or at least exert influence over – vast areas of the Levant up to the border of Mesopotamia. His language is unequivocally positive: “Traditional limits disappeared, the currents of life eddied no longer within the landmarks of tiny kingdoms, but pulsed from end to end of a great empire, embracing many kingdoms and tongues...” (*HE* 322). It was even this imperial reality that led to the Egyptians’ ability to conceptualize of a world-god who existed outside of, and ruled over, a larger world than just Egypt (*HE* 359). Breasted’s tendency to wax poetic about the early 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty reaches its peak when he summarizes the career and individual initiative of Thutmose III:

His reign marks an epoch not only in Egypt but in the whole east as we know it in his age. Never before in history had a single brain wielded the resources of so great a nation and wrought them into such centralized, permanent and at the same time mobile efficiency, that for years they could be brought to bear with incessant impact upon another continent as a skilled artisan manipulates a hundred-ton forge hammer. . . . He built the

first real empire, and is thus the first character possessed of universal aspects, the first world-hero. (*HE* 320)

Such hagiographic description undergoes a substantial shift when Breasted reaches the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty and the dissolution of the New Kingdom. He is now faced with the task of seeking an explanation for the loss of the empire that he had so highly praised. It is here that he reveals ambivalence for outside influences and innovations. As noted above, the Hyksos had introduced not only the material means for warfare, but also the conditions under which the Egyptians discovered a “lust for conquest” (*HE* 233). Breasted had promoted this line – that true conquest was an unnatural impulse for the peaceful Egyptians – prior to his discussion of the New Kingdom, but he lost this narrative thread under the weight of the military annals of the New Kingdom pharaohs. It re-emerges after the New Kingdom, and in modified form. Not only were the Egyptians too unwarlike to be suited to lasting imperialism, but their exposure to the wider, militaristic world had actually planted the seeds of their undoing. Breasted takes stock of the social conditions in the late 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty and subsequent Third Intermediate Period: an army comprised largely of mercenaries, a powerful priesthood controlling too much of the country’s wealth, foreigners of high rank, and an increasing tendency toward theocracy (*HE* 463-473). In an unexpected interpretive move, he looks back to the kings of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty – including the previously lauded Thutmose III – and claims that the decline of the New Kingdom was an inherited situation related to their unchecked imperialism. The very dominance that led to the idea of the world-god also led to the belief that all victories were owed to Amen-Re; the uncontrolled gifts of money and land to temples created the economic power of the priesthood that threatened the centralized government (*HE* 495). These “forces of decay” (*HE* 497) had been gradually



accumulating throughout the New Kingdom, and only a strong leader would have been able to hold back the “unwholesome influences” that came with imperial power. That a Libyan dynasty eventually gained control of Egypt is also attributed to the flaws of the imperial system (*HE* 528). Thus, the outside influences that drew the Egyptians into a state of militarism were also the forces which degraded the internal structure of the country. Social change via diffusion of ideas and influence is, in Breasted’s equation, a dangerous element.

### **C. Influence of Adolf Erman**

Erman, Breasted’s mentor at the University of Berlin and life-long friend, is one of the disciplinary voices that echoes throughout Breasted’s work. The interpretation of social change in *A History of Egypt* is further illuminated by comparison with Erman’s *Life in Ancient Egypt*. Erman also attributed the decline of the New Kingdom to the proliferation of the priesthood and extravagant temple endowments, but unlike Breasted, he did not link this phenomenon to the larger system of imperialism or its negative effect on Egyptian society. He emphasized religion itself as the primary culprit; it “undermined and stifled the energies of the nation. . . . It was natural that the priesthood should thrive on the religious fanaticism of a decaying nation” (Erman 1894: 105). In fact, Breasted exhibits a substantially different approach than his mentor in explaining social change in general. Whereas Breasted is eager to point out the diffusion of traits or those individuals who he believes overcame the inertia of traditional culture and conservatism – Thutmose III and Akhenaten loom large – Erman insists on a stricter interpretation of cultural evolution. He espouses a philosophy of social change akin to unilinear evolution: there is no essential difference between ancient Egyptians and modern people; the conditions

present in antiquity are the same as those present in any other culture at the same level of development.<sup>34</sup> Modern Egyptians – particularly of the poorer classes – are used as ethnographic specimens in Erman’s analysis, as the “modern fellah resembles his forefather of four thousand years ago, except that he speaks Arabic, and has become a Mohammedan” (ibid. 29).<sup>35</sup> Erman quotes from Baedeker’s travel guides (popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) to provide a description of the modern Egyptian peasant, which he claims is also representative of the ancient version; therefore, the average Egyptian of both past and present is docile, practical, limited in imagination, and abused by a corrupt government, becoming increasingly dull and coarse with age (ibid. 34).

Here we see the trope of the unchanging primitive; there is little concern for diffusion or historical contingency to explain social change since *Oriental* society has not, in its essence, changed over millennia. This is a key point: elements of deterministic thought, primarily cultural and environmental, manifest in Erman’s writing, though not in any systematic fashion, nor are they couched in scientific language. Despite his claims that the Egyptians are neither better nor worse than any other culture (ibid. 3), in actuality he consistently makes a distinction between the modern West and the unchanging (and unchangeable) Orient. It is the fact that they were *Oriental* which allows for comparisons between ancient and modern Egypt. From the perspective of purely racial determinism, biological and inherited traits determine the level of development or progress a culture is capable of making; thus, modern primitives (the *fellahin* of Egypt) will provide all the information necessary about their ancient equivalents. From the late 1900s onwards, a

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<sup>34</sup> Thus, the features of early religion in Egypt were of the same nature as those seen in every society of “low development” (Erman 1894: 260); the result of Akhenaten’s religious reformation was the same as all reformations which fail (ibid. 263).

<sup>35</sup> Erman does include a photograph of a “modern fellah” on page 31 as an illustration of the unchanging nature of Egyptian country life.

substantial body of scientific literature was devoted to defining races and their inherent capabilities or deficiencies (see Chapter 4). However, Erman does not employ this scientific vocabulary, as Breasted later did; his belief that the Orient was an unchanging identity is situated in the realm of cultural and environmental determinism.

Examples of this are numerous throughout *Life in Ancient Egypt*: a democratic state was as foreign to the mind of the ancient Orient as it is to the modern (ibid. 53); continual usurpation of power is a fact of life at all times in the East (ibid. 54); and incompetent administrators and listless, downtrodden farmers characterize Egyptian society in past and present (ibid. 13; 129). Erman does not explicitly argue for a biological element in the Orient's unchanging nature; instead, he sees the *environment* as affecting Egyptian culture in the same manner throughout the ages. Thus, Egyptians of all periods were (and are) unwarlike, not due to their peaceful nature as Breasted claims, but because their environment did not inspire militarism. Surrounded by deserts and "threatened only by wretched negroes and nomadic tribes. . . . there was nothing whatever in the countries round Egypt that could incite a nation to conquest" (ibid. 521). In Erman's calculation, ancient, Medieval, and modern Egyptians are submissive and cowardly, as the natural environment prevents them from being otherwise; they are always dependent on foreign mercenaries, from the Nubians in the Pharaonic era to the Albanian troops under Mohammed Ali (ibid. 520-521). Likewise, the monotonous Egyptian landscape stultified all religious and spiritual inclinations, producing grotesque animal gods – "frog-headed fiends" and "repulsive childish forms" – rather than the joyous deities arising from the seas and meadows of Greece, or the pure monotheism inspired by the grandeur of the desert (ibid. 14).

In stark contrast, by the end of his career Breasted would use the concept of a “Great White Race” to argue for the primacy of the eastern Mediterranean, and especially Egypt, in the rise of all things civilized. In his early work, however, his ideas on culture change and its driving forces are more mixed. Situated as he was between the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of racial determinism and the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century culture-historical approach, Breasted draws on both in *A History of Egypt*. As demonstrated above, he tentatively employed diffusionist explanatory models in the vein of culture-historical archaeology, working on the *a priori* assumption that societies tend toward conservatism and inertia. However, Breasted does not carry the diffusionist model to its full extent, as he also argues for the creative energy of the Egyptians, but only when these energies were harnessed by effective leadership (*HE* 143-144); i.e., the guiding hand of a powerful *individual* could stave off the inertia of society.

Elements of racial determinism are minimal, but still discernible, in the *History*; they would become more pronounced in his later work as he shifted his focus to the origins of civilization (see Chapter 4). The vocabulary of biological evolution appears primarily in discussions of the Nubians. Breasted reports that during the Old Kingdom, all of the Nubian tribes were still in a stage of barbarism (*HE* 137). Though the Egyptians are themselves described as being subject to the forces of cultural inertia, they are also amenable to the progressive influences of diffusion from other cultures. The inertia of the Nubians is treated differently: the diffusion of Egyptian influence into Nubia does not result, in Breasted’s estimation, in any essential advancement of the Nubian capacity for civilization. When the highly Egyptianized Napatan rulers conquer Egypt in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, he declares that they were unfit for the imperial task.

However, unlike the Egyptians' struggle with imperialism, the Nubians' troubles are not due to their inherently peaceful nature. In a telling turn of phrase, Breasted claims that "the southern strain with which their blood was tintured began to appear" (*HE* 554) as they lost control of Egypt.

#### **D. The Orient as Narrative Motif**

An unresolved tension exists in the *History* in the depiction of ancient Egypt as an Oriental state. Pharaonic Egypt is both connected to, and distanced from, the caliphates and sultanates of later history. Breasted follows Erman to the extent that he sees similarities in political conditions between Pharaonic and Ottoman/Mamluk Egypt: the threat of usurpation (*HE* 179; 211); the corruption of minor officials (*HE* 245); and abuses that arise from insufficient administrative oversight (*HE* 403). However, he does not perceive ancient and modern Egyptians to be essentially the same in character and lifestyle. Rather, he employs the image of a Muslim Mamluk despot as a foil against which to cast ancient Egypt as a *moral state*. The pharaoh was enlightened, educated and just, continually occupied with affairs of state and concerned for the welfare of those he governed (*HE* 77-83). In ancient Egypt, suspected criminals were given trials, in contrast to the summary executions that characterized Mamluk rule (*HE* 81). For the Old Kingdom – the period which represents the firmest control over state resources in the service of the central government – Breasted's narrative emphasizes the work ethic and productivity of the royal family and, by extension, the nation. The princes held posts in the government, eschewing a life of "indolence and luxury" (*HE* 75); the king himself "did not live the life of a luxurious despot, such as we frequently find among the Mamelukes of Moslem Egypt" (*HE* 77).

In the New Kingdom, enlightened leadership is the theme. Citing the tomb inscriptions of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty vizier Rekhmire, Breasted constructs an image of a king whose wisdom and sense of justice surpasses that of a typical *Oriental* ruler: “the instructions given him [Rekhmire] by the monarch [Thutmose III] on that occasion were not such as we should expect from the lips of an oriental conqueror three thousand five hundred years ago. They display a spirit of kindness and humanity and exhibit an appreciation of state craft surprising in an age so remote” (*HE* 244). Breasted also assigns Western values of leadership to the final king of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Horemheb, based on the text of the Edict of Horemheb at Karnak:

These sane and philanthropic reforms give Harmhab a high place in the history of humane government; especially when we remember that even since the occupation of the country by the English, within the living memory of almost every reader, the evils at which he struck have been found exceedingly persistent and difficult to root out. . . . He showed a spirit of humane solicitude for the amelioration of the conditions among the masses, which has never been surpassed in Egypt, from his time until the present day. (*HE* 406-407)

An interesting contrast arises between Erman and Breasted with regard to kingship. Erman believed the Egyptians, and the modern Orient as well, to be incapable of conceiving of a form of government other than divine kingship, in which all property and people belong to the king; the “great body of the nation” that is a fundamental element of the modern nation-state was an unknown concept (Erman 1894: 53). When Erman concedes that the practical workings of government did not reflect the idealized vision of an omnipotent and virtually omnipresent pharaoh, it is for the purpose of illustrating that rampant corruption – assassination conspiracies, a power-hungry priesthood, and factionalism – was constantly beneath the surface. He considers these “fatal conditions” to be endemic to the East in all periods; whether the ruler of a

Medieval caliphate or ancient Egypt, the king faced the same inevitable corruption, and so too did the average Egyptian continue his work “with oriental indifference” (ibid. 54). Though Breasted also describes the corruption and conspiracies of the Egyptian court, he does not view the office of kingship as static and unchanging, nor the Egyptians as permanently locked into only one way of perceiving the king. In a rare treatment of the *materiality* of a text, he interprets the numerous and widely dispersed commemorative scarabs of Amenhotep III as evidence that divine kingship was undergoing a *modern* innovation: the personal affairs of the king were being publicized for mass consumption not only amongst his own court but also with regard to diplomatic relations. Thus, the pharaoh “is gradually forced from his old superhuman state, suited only to the Nile, into less provincial and more modern relations with his neighbors of Babylon and Mitanni” (HE 351). Although Breasted allows that this shift in mentality may have been unconscious, his interpretation does not render the Egyptian worldview (or that of the Orient generally) as a uniform and static phenomenon, but rather as one with ties to modernity.

Despite the frequency with which Breasted connects Egyptian kingship to enlightened rule (and disconnects it from the “despotic” style of the Mamluks), he seems unable at times to resist the descriptive power of the exotic that would render Egypt, to the American imagination, a part of the mysterious East. The inner circle of court life is portrayed with all of the sensuousness that one would see in the Orientalizing art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He sketches a scene of ancient palace life with a free hand, describing a private moment between the king and a favored courtier. They “recline familiarly in complete relaxation”, attended by slaves who anoint them with oil (HE 76). That this

image of court life is built from a single (fragmented) line in a single text<sup>36</sup> indicates the degree to which this aspect of Egyptian life was rendered with imaginative freedom. In describing Amenhotep III's palace at Malkata, he invokes both the magnificence of a European court and the exoticism of the *Arabian Nights*. Artistic achievements were akin in spirit to those of Louis XIV's reign, and the festivals at Malkata would have been as sumptuous as those under Haroun el-Rashid (*HE* 349). In this way, Breasted avoids the pessimism of Erman and manages to present an ancient Egypt that satisfies the demands of the contemporary imagination: exotic yet enlightened; corrupt, yet ultimately just.

The aim of this chapter has been to place *A History of Egypt* in a broad contextual scope. Part I demonstrated that the subfield of the history of Egyptology is increasing in prominence and that attention to James Henry Breasted has focused primarily on his role as administrator, fundraiser and explorer. An analysis of his texts and his claims about the past fills a gap in the current literature. Part II placed the *History* in the context of other popular syntheses of ancient Egypt that were current in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, illustrating the ways in which Breasted's book diverged from what had come before. In the following section, I demonstrated that it was not simply the form of the *History* that departed from previous approaches. Breasted intended to establish a new, scientific Egyptology in America that drew on his German experiences but improved on those aspects which he felt suffered from the traditionalism of Europe. *A History of Egypt* was meant to be a popular demonstration of the type of history that could be written using his methods of meticulous textual research. Part IV focused on four aspects of Breasted's interpretation of Egyptian society in the *History*: the influence of evolutionist and

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<sup>36</sup> "When it came to pass-----his majesty caused that I be anointed with fat [by the side of his majesty]" from the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty tomb inscriptions of Senedjemib (Breasted 1906, vol. I: 122).



diffusionist thought; progress versus conservatism as explanatory elements of social change; the similarities and differences between Erman's and Breasted's incorporation of these influences; and the "Orient" as a narrative motif to which Erman and Breasted responded differently.

## Chapter 4

### An Ordered World: Delineating the Progress of Civilization

When asked in 2010 to speculate on the coming forty years, political scientist George Friedman described the emergence of new naval and economic powers, predicting that shifting alliances will likely result in a global conflict: "...every century has a war. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is not going to be the first century without major warfare".<sup>1</sup> The observation underlying this rather grim prognostication – that the forces which have caused conflict in the past are still in operation today – is one that finds expression in Breasted's writing from 1914 onward. His view of the world's future was slightly more optimistic, for he believed that human conscience could overcome destructive tendencies (Breasted 1934: ix); however, he shared Friedman's dispassionate attitude toward the long-term processes that result in friction between nations. For Breasted, exploitation of material resources is a necessary corollary to the development of civilization, and imperial expansion to satisfy the demand for resources is a natural outcome of social progress. This worldview not only accepts the inevitability of warfare, it sanitizes it to a degree in which it is depicted not as bloody brutality, but as the civilized right of superior nations.

Breasted saw the horrors of World War I: separated from the German colleagues with whom he had spent so many years, he received notice of their sons' deaths at the front, and ultimately saw his own son enlist. However, this very real horror did not alter his attitudes toward humanity's progress; instead, his writing from 1914 onward exhibits an increasing tendency to explicate the forces which drive civilization and to trace them

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<sup>1</sup> "George Friedman: The US Stays on Top", *Smithsonian* 41(4): 69, July/August 2010.

to their origin. This chapter will focus on a selection of Breasted's work beginning at the midpoint of his career, illustrating how the central themes of his writing from 1914-1920 evolved from his earlier work and carried on to the end of his life. *Ancient Times: A History of the Early World* was written during the first two years of the war, published in 1916 and revised in 1935. Taken together, these two editions are core texts for analyzing Breasted's mid- and late-career objectives. Additionally, a series of articles written from 1919-1925 for both scholarly and popular journals further illustrate his conception of the past and his goals for Egyptology. By this point in his career, he was overwhelmingly concerned with tracing the "career of man" far beyond the confines of Egyptology and the Orient. His primary objective was defining the elements that constitute "civilization" and tracing their spread throughout the world. As a result, the intersecting axes of *geography*, *chronology* and *race* became guiding concerns of his work as he outlined where civilization arose, and when, and at the impetus of whom. He linked the prehistoric Near East to the historic Old and New Worlds, and ultimately argued for an academic approach that would see the history of mankind as part of the natural history of the universe; in doing so, he set out an ambitious and surprisingly modern plan for Oriental research.

### **I. *Ancient Times* and Modern Problems**

In *The Vertigo Years: Europe, 1900-1914*, Philipp Blom characterizes this period as one of speed, exhilaration and anxiety. Major technological advances led to the sense of living in an accelerating world plunging into modernity. Alongside this exhilaration came a foreboding about the future and an unease as to which nations would successfully wield these new forms of technological power (Blom 2008: 2-3). A spirit of anarchy

prevailed in some European circles: Italian Futurism, an artistic and literary movement, celebrated urban industrialism, youthful rebellion, and a rejection of all forms of expression considered traditional or conventional. The Futurist ethos drew on modern technology for its metaphors, most notably modes of transport. F.T. Marinetti, the leading propagandist for the movement, wrote a brilliantly poetic manifesto of Futurism published on the front page of *Le Figaro* in February of 1909. In it he glorifies militarism, industry, revolution and the speeding train:

We will sing the great masses agitated by work, pleasure, or revolt; we will sing the multicolored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals; the nocturnal vibration of arsenals and docks beneath their glaring electric moons; greedy stations devouring smoking serpents; factories hanging from the clouds by the threads of their smoke . . . adventurous steamers scenting the horizon; large-breasted locomotives bridled with long tubes, and the slippery flight of airplanes whose propellers have flaglike fluttering and applauses of enthusiastic crowds. (translated in Taylor 1968: 286)

This arena of industrial progress was not limited to the European powers; the United States had become an increasingly significant player in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1870 onwards, the economic and political influence of the world's Western nations underwent significant shifts: Japan began utilizing British industrial techniques, particularly military, and their imperial ambitions brought them into conflict with Russia; meanwhile, Germany and the US took the lead in technological advancement over Britain and France, especially in the realm of electrical and chemical science (Weightman 2007: 283 ff.; 340 ff.). There was a destructive corollary to the developments that so invigorated the Futurist intellectuals of this period.<sup>2</sup> The weapons of modern warfare emerged – submarines, torpedoes, machine guns and explosives – and

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<sup>2</sup> The Futurists welcomed Italy's entry into World War I on the side of Britain and France, viewing the Allies as forces of progress against the conservative and archaic Germans and Austrians. Marinetti referred to war as "the sole hygiene of the world" (Humphreys 1999: 64).

the great naval powers raced to build ever more impressive dreadnought battleships (Weightman 2007: 350, 362; Blom 2008: 389). Two political cartoons that appeared in 1904 reflect the anxieties of this time. In the satirical magazine *Puck*, Joseph Keppler, Jr. drew an ominous image of American imperialism: an eagle stands on a globe with feet planted in the US and wings spread, casting a shadow from the Philippines to Puerto Rico<sup>3</sup> (published in Dewey 2007: 134). On December 24th, 1904, the *Chicago Daily News* published an image by their chief cartoonist Luther Bradley entitled “The Heathen Hear the Christmas Chimes”, depicting frightened Chinese citizens crouching behind a wall while church bells in the shape of cannons ring out the sounds of war.<sup>4</sup> These two images reference a number of major conflicts in the years leading up to World War I: American entanglement with European expansion into Asia; the imperial ambitions of several Western powers that were gradually colonizing Chinese territory; the corresponding Christian evangelism that was a causal factor of the bloody Boxer Rebellion of 1898-1901; and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 that was fought primarily on Chinese soil.

It was during these fifteen years of technological advancement and militarism that Breasted wrote both *A History of Egypt* and *Ancient Times*. For the first two-thirds of this period he lived or traveled abroad much of the time: from late 1899 to late 1904 he was based in Berlin and traveling through all the major cities of western Europe, copying museum inscriptions for the *Wörterbuch*; the winter and spring seasons of 1905/6 and 1906/7 were spent on epigraphic missions in Egypt; and from 1907 to early 1908 he was back in Berlin on another leave of absence from the University of Chicago. It wasn't

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<sup>3</sup> The Philippines and Puerto Rico were both surrendered to the US by Spain in 1898 at the end of the Spanish-American war.

<sup>4</sup> This image is also published in Smith and Dennis 1917: 39.

until the spring of 1908 that Breasted returned to the US to live for an extended period, and the war in Europe, and eventually America's entry into it, kept him from traveling abroad for almost twelve years. When he did finally return to Europe, it was in August of 1919 en route to his first reconnaissance mission in the Middle East for the newly established Oriental Institute.

#### **A. Breasted's Window into World War I**

When the war first broke out in July of 1914, it was not expected to be a long conflict. Breasted had been back in the US for several years and by the spring of 1914 he was busy with his first attempts to secure funding for Oriental research beyond what the University of Chicago could provide. His friendship with astronomer (and former University of Chicago professor) George Ellery Hale was instrumental in these early attempts, as Hale was not only a prominent member of the National Academy of Sciences, but was also well connected to various philanthropists, including industrialists Andrew Carnegie and Henry Huntington, and businessmen Charles Yerkes and Norman Harris (W. Adams 1940). Throughout 1914, Breasted corresponded frequently with Hale about possible funding contacts. His initial plan was not for a fully-fledged institute, but for a "floating laboratory" – a Nile houseboat outfitted with workshops, dark rooms, offices, library and a deck auditorium for lectures. He even went so far as to have blueprints of the boat drafted and accepted bids from Cairo boat-builders.<sup>5</sup> However, these early plans did not see fruition; Norman Harris turned down the request to provide the funds for the proposed "Harris Egyptian Institute of the National Academy of

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<sup>5</sup> JHB to Hale, May 1, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

Sciences”,<sup>6</sup> and plans to solicit funds from Andrew Carnegie,<sup>7</sup> the Huntington family,<sup>8</sup> and a wide variety of wealthy wives and widows<sup>9</sup> also came to naught. Thus, at the outbreak of war in 1914, Breasted and Hale were both concerned with matters much closer to home. In September of that year Hale expressed hope that the war would be only a temporary inconvenience: “This frightful war will upset many plans, but I greatly hope that it will do no more than to postpone the expedition to Egypt.”<sup>10</sup>

Breasted kept up a correspondence with his former professor Adolf Erman from 1914 to 1916, though Erman’s letters arrived censored. From the early days of the war, Erman was concerned with defending Germany’s actions to his American colleagues. In August of 1914 he enclosed newspaper clippings in his letter to Breasted in an attempt to counter the Allied “misinformation”,<sup>11</sup> and by October of that year he vehemently denounced the “shameful lies” being propagated by England: he maintained that German soldiers act kindly toward French peasants, that the attack on Rheims cathedral was entirely justified, and that the Russians commit atrocities in East Prussian territory.<sup>12</sup> By mid-1915, Erman’s tone began to grow less defensive and more elegiac. He wrote “The world may well again climb to the heights, but we old folks will not again live that way and we shall leave this life with much different feelings than those we at one time in our

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<sup>6</sup> Hale to Harris, May 8, 1914; and Hale to JHB, July 14, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>7</sup> Carnegie to Hale, May 11, 1914; Hale to JHB, June 3, 1914; JHB to Hale, June 8, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>8</sup> Hale to JHB, May 1, 1916; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>9</sup> JHB to Hale, July 17, 1914; JHB to Hale, June 25, 1915; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>10</sup> Hale to JHB, September 25, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>11</sup> Erman to JHB, August 23, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>12</sup> Erman to JHB, October 29, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

life experienced.”<sup>13</sup> He expresses sadness, rather than anger, that George Reisner wrote what Erman considered anti-German propaganda in an Egyptian-English newspaper,<sup>14</sup> and he takes the opportunity to tell of his deep affection for the Breasted family, in anticipation of never seeing them again.<sup>15</sup> From November 1916 to December 1919, no further correspondence from Erman is preserved in the archives.

From 1915 onward, Breasted also began receiving notices of mourning from his Egyptological colleagues. A black-bordered notecard arrived announcing the death of Gaston Maspero’s son Jean, himself a noted papyrologist, in February, followed by a letter from Maspero in August in which he described the “mad vanity” of the Prussian emperor who “deliberately imposed that war on us, and at the cruel and savage manner the German troops killed and destroyed inoffensive civilians and buildings.”<sup>16</sup> In July of 1916 came another black-bordered notecard, this one in memory of Erman’s son; Eduard Meyer, who Breasted admired as one of his generation’s greatest historians, had lost both his son and his future son-in-law the year before.<sup>17</sup>

For Breasted’s thoughts throughout this period we can refer to only a small number of his own letters.<sup>18</sup> What his and his colleagues’ letters reveal is an emphasis not only on national allegiance, but also on the distinction between *civilized* and *uncivilized* peoples. Breasted was firm in his national loyalties: writing in 1917 to Kuno

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<sup>13</sup> Erman to JHB, May 30, 1915; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>14</sup> Erman to JHB, December 31, 1915; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>15</sup> Erman to JHB, April 23, 1916; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>16</sup> Maspero to JHB, August 31, 1915; James H. Breasted Papers, Box 8, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>17</sup> Erman to JHB, May 30, 1915; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>18</sup> The letters Breasted must have written in response to Adolf Erman from 1914-1916 are not preserved in the Research Archives of the Oriental Institute; if they survive, they are likely deposited with the personal papers of Adolf Erman.



Meyer, a German scholar of Celtic philology who left Europe for the US in 1914, he explained

But I should be sailing under false colors if I did not indicate exactly where I stand. Just as you, inspite of many years residence in England and notwithstanding many personal ties, at once chose allegiance to *your* native land in her struggle with a foreign adversary, so I have chosen without hesitation and with unswerving loyalty, though perhaps at the cost of precious friendships, the cause of *my* native land.<sup>19</sup>

When his son Charles enlisted in the army after the US entered the war, Breasted expressed his great pride in Charles, despite the fact that he had seen his colleagues lose their own sons. When Charles was discharged due to ill health before he was even posted overseas, Breasted mentioned to George Ellery Hale his disappointment that his son would not, in fact, go to war.<sup>20</sup> He saw the war as necessary for saving *civilization* from the destructive hands of the Germans,<sup>21</sup> and he became rather enraptured: “I thought I knew something of renunciation but I am just beginning to learn – to catch a distant vision of the consecration of heroism, which transfigures life with a new glory.”<sup>22</sup> There is even a touch of racially-inflected cultural identification when Breasted wrote that “we *Anglo-Saxon* people must put our teeth together and put it through”<sup>23</sup>(emphasis added).

Interestingly, Erman’s letters echo similar concerns with demarcating civilization, though from the opposite side of the conflict. At the outset, Erman wrote of the unifying effect of warfare, claiming that political and geographic divisions within the empire had ceased to matter: “we are all one people. . . . it is a great joy to have lived in the midst of

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<sup>19</sup> JHB to Kuno Meyer, April 16, 1917; James H. Breasted Papers, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>20</sup> JHB to Hale, February 25, 1918; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>21</sup> JHB to Charles Breasted, October 29, 1917; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Charles Breasted, Box 8, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>22</sup> JHB to Charles Breasted, October 30, 1917; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Charles Breasted, Box 8, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*.

this upsurge of a great people.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast to this unified German people, Erman observes that the “half-civilized” are threatening the destruction of his culture.<sup>25</sup> These “half-civilized” he refers to are not British, or French, or Russian; rather, they are *Japanese, Sudanese, and Gurkha* – non-white people from whom the Allies solicited military aid. Stanley Weintraub (2001: 5-6) writes of a similar mindset amongst Germany’s literati, in which intellectuals such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann supported the war as a necessary defense against inferior civilizations – those of lesser cultural and technological development. I will return below to the issue of defining civilization – on both cultural and racial grounds – as it manifests in Breasted’s writing from 1914 onward.

### **B. A Textbook instead of an Institute**

Just as the Futurists declared that they stood “on the extreme promontory of ages”, so too did Breasted feel that his generation was witnessing a transformative period in the history of scholarship. In 1925 he summarized the historical goals that he had been formulating since the pre-war era, christening his approach the “New Past”. Advances in geology, prehistoric archaeology, and decipherment (particularly of various forms of cuneiform) had rapidly increased awareness of epochs previously little known, such that Breasted declared “neither thought nor education has yet become adjusted to it” (Breasted 1925: 4). He advocated for the unique importance of Oriental history on the basis that “there is thus disclosed to us an imposing panorama of the human career in a vista of

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<sup>24</sup> Erman to JHB, August 23, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>25</sup> Erman to JHB, October 29, 1914; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with Adolf Erman, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

successive ages such as no earlier generation has ever been able to survey” (ibid. 12).<sup>26</sup>

But whereas the Futurists saw the past as a dead landscape, museums as no better than cemeteries, Breasted saw history as the means to understanding the conditions of modernity, which in the context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, meant understanding the origins of (and justification for) imperialism, warfare, and the superiority of those cultures which possess and transmit the hallmarks of “civilization”.

As discussed above, Breasted was not successful in his early attempts to secure funding for his research plans. When he was commissioned to write a high school textbook on ancient history, he was reluctant to put his research on hold, but also needed to alleviate his financial distress. He was finally persuaded by the fact that textbooks currently in use neglected the ancient Near East in favor of Greece and Rome. He railed against classicists who lacked the vision to see “the human career as a whole” (*Pioneer* 222). Thus, *Ancient Times* eventually became a statement of his own research goals as much as it was a textbook for a young audience; it became a vehicle for laying forth the plan for which he had been unsuccessful in securing research funding. It is also possible that he saw the opportunity to produce the sort of scholarship that he had always wished to do. In 1904 he had written to his mother of his admiration for Eduard Meyer, his colleague in Berlin:

He [Meyer] sweeps the whole field of the Orient down into Greek and Roman times including the history of those two peoples also. I sometimes long to stretch my wings over such a field as that! . . . The career of man down into Christian times – that is a fascinating study! As it is, I only get him started with all the material arts and a long experience in government,

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<sup>26</sup> It is interesting to compare Breasted’s ambitions for Near Eastern studies with those expressed by S.R.K. Glanville upon his appointment to the first Chair of Egyptology at Cambridge in 1946. Whereas Breasted was intent on establishing a cutting edge research institute, more than two decades later Glanville rather diffidently explained that Egypt had its uses in university education, though “the truth is that Egyptology is never likely to be able to claim anything but a modest place in the academic economy” (Glanville 1947: 6).

organization and law; - and there I have to leave him. . . . This leaves unused in myself capabilities of comprehension and sympathy which I long to employ.<sup>27</sup>

*Ancient Times* covered exactly this broad scope, as it began with the prehistoric periods of Europe and the Near East, extending to the rise of Christianity and decline of the Roman empire into the mid-first millennium CE. The political context of 1914 contributed to the book's focus on delineating the rise and progress of civilization, and differentiating the traits of civilized society from those of barbarism.

In writing for a young audience, Breasted was cognizant of the difficult role he had to play in explaining the progress of civilization within a contemporary context in which civilization, at least in Europe, seemed to be crumbling. As he wrote in his journal in August of 1914, "I wonder whether I am capable of convincing a skeptical new generation of schoolchildren that the same processes which are destroying the European world of my generation lifted mankind from jungle savagery to what we hopefully call civilization?" (*Pioneer* 227). As this sentiment illustrates, it would be myopic to view popularizing works, and especially school textbooks, as somehow unworthy of critical and scholarly reflection. They contain the historical narratives accepted and internalized by a generation and a nation, or in the case of *Ancient Times*, by more than one generation and more than one nation. This has been recently and cogently stated by Stephen Prothero in *Religious Literacy*:

Textbooks have long functioned in the United States as the scriptures of our schools. . . . Schoolbooks tell us what we need to know and what we ought to value. They tell us what matters and what can be ignored, what is worth dying for and what (or who) is to be shunned. They tell us what America is, both as an ideal and as a reality, and they interpret the wider world – the beaker in which the American experiment is forever bubbling

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<sup>27</sup> JHB to his mother, January 17, 1904; James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

up. This is no small power: telling children what to think about themselves, their country, and the world. (Prothero 2008: 69)

*Ancient Times* certainly reached a large audience. In 1920, Breasted wrote to Hale that over 100,000 students were using the first edition of the textbook each year and not only in the US, but also in China, Japan and Australia – and a French translation was being encouraged by the publisher.<sup>28</sup> Despite Breasted’s frequent criticism of classicists, who he perceived as conventional, narrow-minded and – to use his words – “moss-grown” (*Pioneer* 222), at least one reviewer for *The Classical Weekly* admitted that *Ancient Times* was the best ancient history text in current use, even if he did include the barb that only Breasted could persuade a classical historian that devoting a third of the text to the Orient was “almost justifiable” (Magoffin 1917: 199). The book was roundly praised by *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (Hoschander 1926), in which it was deemed one of the most important works on archaeology pertaining to western Asia and sufficiently scientific for scholarly readers. By 1927, a reviewer for *The American Historical Review* (Rogers 1927: 830) noted that the textbook was “almost universally” used by those teaching ancient history. The second edition, published in 1935, continued to be received favorably (e.g., Mattingly 1935).

Significantly, it wasn’t only high school students who were reading and reflecting on the book. Theodore Roosevelt (1917: 272) wrote a review for *Outlook* in which he advocated that Breasted’s approach to the study of man should be a primary component of school curricula. Several months later, after the US had entered World War I, Roosevelt arranged for a private meeting with Breasted during which he mentioned that

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<sup>28</sup> JHB to Hale, December 21, 1920; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

*Ancient Times* as well as *A History of Egypt* led him to the assessment that control of northern Syria was critical to defeating Germany's expansion, just as it had been critical in warfare between the Egyptians and Hittites (*Pioneer* 233-234). Perhaps most important for Breasted's future plans, four individuals close to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. both read and praised *Ancient Times*: his wife, Abby; Wallace Buttrick, president of the Rockefeller-funded General Education Board; Abraham Flexner, member of the GEB and reformer of American university education; and Frederick Gates, business advisor and representative of Rockefeller.<sup>29</sup> Gates was especially influential with Rockefeller and also highly impressed with *Ancient Times*. He wrote to Breasted that it was a book "to read, to re-read and to read still again, and to commend to every lover of books, of men, and of the story of human progress – which ought to be the soul as it is the only worthy theme of History" (*Pioneer* 230).

## II. The Rise of Civilization

When *A History of Egypt* was published in 1905, Breasted was already concerned with demonstrating that European civilization found its roots in the Near East, and specifically Egypt (*HE* 3-4). As discussed in Chapter 3, he employed diffusionist explanations for the spread of cultural traits from the eastern Mediterranean to southern Europe. However, at this early stage of his career, he had not yet systematically articulated the defining characteristics of "civilization"; neither had he attempted to link the prehistoric to historic periods. In fact, before the advances in prehistoric archaeology in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Breasted maintained that "These men of the paleolithic age were the first inhabitants of whom we have any knowledge in Egypt.

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<sup>29</sup> JHB to Buttrick, January 13, 1919; folder 6851, box 659, series 1.4, RG General Education Board, Rockefeller Family Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter designated RAC).

They can not be connected in any way with the historic or prehistoric civilization of the Egyptians, and they fall exclusively within the province of the geologist and anthropologist” (*HE* 25). By 1919, he was advocating a different approach to the study of the past – one which anticipates the modern interdisciplinary teams that work on archaeological excavations today. For a full recovery of the career of *man* – a recurring phrase that appeared as early as 1905 (*HE* 3) – the fields of philology, art history, archaeology, physical anthropology, geology, meteorology, palaeoethnobotany, and zooarchaeology must be represented in a wide-ranging program of investigation (Breasted 1919a: 170 ff.; 1919b: 199)

Breasted called for the study of humanity to be fully integrated with the natural sciences, and the ancient Orient to function as the keystone of that integration. Egypt occupied a special place in this rapprochement, as it was the link between the rise of civilization in the prehistoric era and the transmission of civilization to Europe (Breasted 1919a: 168; 1919c: 289). In 1914, Breasted wrote to George Ellery Hale of the difficulty in achieving recognition for the humanities among natural scientists.<sup>30</sup> He corresponded with Hale in an attempt to secure organized assistance for humanities research – for example, by introducing a “historico-philosophical” section into the National Academy of Sciences<sup>31</sup> – arguing that the antiquated methods of “a few ancient and apathetic classicists” had been supplanted by methods more akin to those used in the natural sciences.<sup>32</sup> Influenced by his friendship with Hale, he later introduced an analogy that

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<sup>30</sup> JHB to Hale, April 7, 1914, 3-page letter (note: JHB sent two letters to Hale on this day, one 3-page and one 4-page); James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>31</sup> JHB to Hale, April 7, 1914, 4-page letter; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>32</sup> JHB to Hale, April 7, 1914, 3-page letter; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

would feature in his writing until the end of his career: the similarities between the needs of an astronomer's laboratory and a proposed historian's laboratory (Breasted 1919a: 180-181). The equipment, staff, and funding necessary for an astronomer was also necessary for the sort of interdisciplinary team that he envisioned at the nascent Oriental Institute.

Thus, when Breasted approached the writing of *Ancient Times* in 1914, he had a vision in mind for aligning Oriental studies with the natural sciences.<sup>33</sup> In fact, in April of that year he wrote a review of H.R. Hall's *Ancient History of the Near East: from the Earliest Times to the Battle of Salamis* that revealed more about Breasted's plan for writing *Ancient Times* than it did about Hall's book (Breasted 1914). He warns that with a topic so vast and material so numerous, the author runs the risk of the “*materials* determining the *form* of the treatment, and obscuring the human career that lies behind them” (ibid. 583). In other words, a strong narrative line that illuminates the *processes* of human development, rather than a catalog of events or archaeological data, was foremost in Breasted's mind when it came to planning his own approach. He would ultimately construct a narrative of human history that saw those elements which were creating chaos in his own lifetime – imperial expansion, economic exploitation and industrialism – as the building blocks of civilized society. He presented an ordered world in which these elements, though volatile, were necessary to human advancement. He advanced this model in three primary ways: 1) delineating the characteristics, originators, and inheritors of civilized society; 2) mapping the geo-racial boundaries of civilization; and 3) supporting the idea of enlightened exploitation.

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<sup>33</sup> For a brief discussion of *Ancient Times* and Breasted's interest in scientific method, see Kuklick 1996: 113-114, 183-185.



### A. Defining Civilization

The first aspect of Breasted's model is apparent in the first edition of *Ancient Times*. Whereas *A History of Egypt* was little concerned with the prehistoric, the 1916 edition of *Ancient Times*<sup>34</sup> opens with the declaration that the prehistoric should not be isolated from, or neglected in favor of, historic periods (*AT* 1916: iv). The first chapter details the Palaeolithic through Neolithic ages in Europe, using illustrations of modern "natives" as ethnographic analogies for the state of Palaeolithic culture and technology. Thus, indigenous Australians, Native Americans, and Inuit stand in for "the early savage of Europe" (*ibid.* 4); Tasmanians are cited as an example of "the lowest savage tribes" discovered by Europeans and therefore the closest living analogy to the conditions of life in the Old Stone Age. From the European prehistoric the next chapter jumps to the predynastic period in Egypt, a jump necessitated by the fact that the people of Europe were unable to advance any further without outside influence; namely, influence from the Near East. Before introducing Egypt, Breasted reminds his readers that civilization originated in the Orient, with civilization being defined here as the ability to write, manipulate metal, form centralized governments, and engage in long-distance commerce (*ibid.* 33-34).

When the focus shifts to Egypt, Breasted's narrative style shifts also: he introduces a travelogue format in order to engage the young reader in the exotic beauties of the Egyptian countryside. With a view from "a comfortable railway car", the traveler can survey the expanses of agriculture, the "little villages of dark mud-brick huts", the

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<sup>34</sup> *Ancient Times* will hereafter be abbreviated as *AT* in parenthetical references. The differences between the first and second editions are significant to the discussion; therefore, *AT* will always be followed by the designation 1916 or 1935.

date palms, bright grass and blazing sunshine, and the “brown-skinned men . . . swaying up and down as they rhythmically lift an irrigation bucket . . . exactly like the well sweep of our grandfathers in New England” (*AT* 1916: 35-36). Breasted tells his readers that the modern Egyptian laborers are analogous to the ancient Egyptian peasants of the prehistoric; the modern village huts beyond the train’s windows are exactly as those of the prehistoric era (*ibid.* 39). The very earliest ideographic writing – not yet invested with phonetic values – is compared to the writing “among the uncivilized peoples in our *own* land. . . . beyond which native American records never passed” (*ibid.* 39-40). The Egyptians, however, took a great step toward civilization when they discovered the use of copper. In evocative language, Breasted connects the first Egyptian to discover copper extraction with the industrial revolution of six millennia later, “For these things of our modern world, *and all they signify*, would never have come to pass but for the little bead of metal which the wondering Egyptian held in his hand for the first time” (*ibid.* 48; emphasis added).

At the close of the section on Egypt, Breasted reminds his audience that Egyptian civilization carried on into the “Christian Age” and thence into Europe. A series of discussion questions are posed for students at the conclusion of the chapter, in which they are asked to reflect on the *libraries* of the ancient Egyptian, the *progress* of civilization from the pyramid era onward, the *long-distance commercial* activities of the Egyptians, *monumental* architecture, and the earliest belief in *one god* (*AT* 1916: 98-99). Later in the book, in the transition from the Orient to the Greeks, Breasted maintains that Europeans carried on the progress of civilization after it diffused northward from Egypt

to southern Europe, resulting in democracy, advanced science and lasting monotheism (ibid. 219).

Keeping in mind Stephen Prothero's assertion about the importance of textbooks – that they convey the values by which people assess themselves and their world – Breasted's narrative of the rise and progress of civilization in *Ancient Times* stands out as a powerful statement of European (and by extension, American) dominance in the course of humanity's progress. The centrality of ancient Egypt in Breasted's model does *not* challenge the Eurocentrism of his thought. On the contrary, the ancient Egyptians are separated from their Arab successors and folded into the narrative of European cultural superiority. This is a point that becomes much more explicit in the second edition of *Ancient Times*, and we will return to it in section *B* below.

When Breasted opens *Ancient Times* with a comparison between prehistoric humans and contemporary indigenous peoples, he is immediately positioning his readers in relation to the world around them. They, the readers of the text, are the living inheritors of the continually unfolding processes of civilization that the book seeks to explain. The very act of reading sets them apart from Native Americans and indigenous Australians, as Breasted makes clear that writing and a literary tradition is one of the foundations of civilization. The travelogue format, in which the observer sits in the comfort of the train viewing the toiling laborers, further distances the reader from indigenous peoples; in this instance, modern Egyptian farmers are the equivalent of Native Americans, stuck in a state of technological development reminiscent of “our grandfathers” and living in physical conditions (and one might assume, emotional and mental conditions) no different from those of prehistoric periods. The “brown-skinned

men” that “sway rhythmically” at their agricultural toil echo the swaying date palms, rendering the people an indivisible part of the natural landscape. This is in stark contrast to the (idealized) industrialized lifestyle of civilized nations, in which labor is mechanized and people are free to develop higher pursuits. The reader becomes the gentleman traveler, detached from that which he observes and therefore able to discern the larger processes at work. The imagery of the train adds to this effect, as the mud-brick huts and farmers become stationary objects in contrast to the speeding, dynamic train carrying the informed foreign traveler.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to note that these modern (Arab) Egyptian peasants are equated with *prehistoric* (read: pre-civilized) ancient Egyptians, not *Pharaonic* Egyptians. With the introduction of writing, centralized government, and metallurgy, civilized ancient Egypt emerges – and by extension, Egyptians become not only compatriots in, but originators of, that civilized mode of life shared by the reader. Modern Arab peasants, however, are reminiscent of an earlier time. The Pharaonic metallurgist is linked to the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialist, and Egyptian civilization is transferred to Christian Europe. Thus, a millennium of Islamic rule and culture is elided in favor of tracing the transmission of civilization from Pharaonic Egypt to Europe. Further, ancient Egyptian culture is rediscovered by the ingenuity of its inheritors – Europeans (*AT* 1916: 97-98). That this viewpoint was being expressed in 1916, when America was on the verge of entering a war against the Ottoman Empire, had political ramifications. Following on the

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<sup>35</sup> This sentiment – the prerogative of educated Europeans and Americans to study (and materially appropriate) the cultural heritage of Egypt in the face of perceived native ignorance – is manifested in correspondence between Starr Murphy, legal advisor to the Rockefeller Foundation, and Harry Pratt Judson, president of the University of Chicago. Discussing Breasted’s proposal for an Oriental Institute, Murphy writes “It seems to me of utmost importance that these priceless records of antiquity should be preserved and made accessible to the *scholars of civilized nations*” (emphasis added; Murphy to Judson, March 5, 1919; folder 812, box 112, RG III 2G, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC).

defeat of the Ottomans, scholars (including Breasted) acted on the chance to exercise Western scientific imperialism in an area recently “delivered from Turkish misrule” (*Pioneer* 238). Breasted did reserve some praise for Muslim leadership when he described the early caliphs of the late first millennium CE and their capital at Baghdad, but this description occurred under the heading of “The Triumph of the Barbarians”. He describes the “wild courage of barbarian Arabs” (*AT* 1916: 708) that led to their conquest of the Orient, but in taking over the established urban centers of the Persians and learning to read and to command a vast empire, at their origin they were, in Breasted’s estimation, borrowers of civilization, rather than its inventors.

## **B. Geography and Race**

Between 1916 and 1935, advances in prehistoric archaeology led Breasted to revise *Ancient Times* and produce a second edition. Guy Brunton and Gertrude Caton-Thompson had discovered the prehistoric Badarian culture in Egypt, dating to the fifth millennium BCE, and published their excavation report on Badari in 1928. Flinders Petrie published *Prehistoric Egypt* in 1920, and Alexander Scharff discussed the Nagada culture in *Das vorgeschichtliche Gräberfeld von Abusir el Meleq* in 1926. Breasted’s own Oriental Institute produced *Prehistoric Survey of Egypt and Western Asia, Vol. I: Paleolithic Man and the Nile-Faiyum Divide*, by K. S. Sandford and W. J. Arkell, in 1929. Faced with this growing body of material closely connected to geology, Breasted shifted the tone of the book, particularly in the first half, toward a more scientific discourse. The travelogue narrative was removed and more explicitly scientific vocabulary was introduced. The ethnographic comparisons with modern indigenous peoples were retained, and added to them was a more clearly stated distinction between

the characteristics of civilized and uncivilized society. *Civilized* society was that which had attained agriculture and animal domestication, metallurgy, writing, centralized government, monumental stone architecture, sea trade, and industrial and artistic development (*AT* 1935: 5; 73). To these material advances Breasted adds ethical qualities of civilization, such as “a belief in right living and kindness to others, and that a good life here was necessary to happiness in the next world” (*AT* 1935: 73).

The most noticeable change, however, was the addition of several figures on which Breasted mapped the geo-racial boundaries of early civilization, as well as a foray into physical anthropology in order to explain these racial categories. This trend begins early in the book: in the opening chapter on the Palaeolithic, Breasted inserts a map of northern Africa, Europe and Asia, a region which he refers to as the Northwest Quadrant (of the eastern hemisphere). Over this map are superimposed the racial designations of the people inhabiting this area (see Figure 1). The “Great White Race” stretches from northern Europe to northern Africa, the “Mongoloid/Yellow Race” covers eastern Asia, and the “Black Race” begins just south of 20° N, between the second and third Nile cataracts in the region where Lower Nubia transitions to Upper Nubia. Breasted explains that the people of the Great White Race spread throughout the Northwest Quadrant at the end of the Palaeolithic, “where eventually was produced the civilization which is ours today. . . . In North Africa these people were dark-skinned, but nevertheless physically they belong to the Great White Race” (*AT* 1935: 12).

Later in the book, Breasted elaborates on the connection between geography, race and civilization. He inserts a more schematic version of the previous map, in which a wedge denotes the Northwest Quadrant (*AT* 1935: 130; see Figure 2). Inside this wedge

is the Great White Race and the area is divided into three topographical zones: the northern flatlands, the highland zone, and the southern flatlands. Breasted explains as follows:

The peoples of the Great Northwest Quadrant, as far back as we know anything about prehistoric man, have all been members of a race of white men, who have been well called the Great White Race. The men of this race created the civilization which we have inherited. If we look outside of the Great Northwest Quadrant, we find in the neighboring territory only two other clearly distinguished races – the Mongoloids on the east and the Negroes on the south. These peoples occupy an important place in the modern world, but they played no part in the rise of civilization. (*AT* 1935: 131)

Breasted bases his insistence that those outside the Northwest Quadrant are of no relevance to the rise of civilization largely on chronology and diffusionist views of culture change. A recurring feature of his writing, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s as work in Mesopotamia increased, is the strong emphasis on origins: he continually asserted that the chief features of civilization were developed in Egypt *first*, and then diffused outward to other parts of the world.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Chinese and African culture developed far later than in the Fertile Crescent, such that “as we move out from the Egypto-Babylonian group [in the fourth millennium BCE] the culture level declines and civilization fades and disappears” (Breasted 1919a: 166). He finds it more likely that agriculture arose in Egypt and diffused to Mesopotamia (*ibid.* 176); that cattle were domesticated first in Egypt (*ibid.* 177); and that the emergence of Egyptian writing owes nothing to outside influence (Breasted 1919e: 562). For sub-Saharan Africans, their physical isolation from Egypt also kept them out of the stream of civilization (*AT* 1935: 133).

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<sup>36</sup> This made it into the public eye as well in a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article of December 27, 1926 entitled “1<sup>st</sup> Men Lived in Egypt; Breasted Goes to Prove It”. Breasted is quoted as saying “Egypt’s first man was ages earlier than Europe’s.”

Breasted turns to physical anthropology to illustrate the distinguishing features of the Great White Race. Despite the use of “black”, “yellow”, and “white”, skin color is not the only criterion, since “on the south of the Mediterranean the people of the Great White Race are darker-skinned than elsewhere” (*AT* 1935: 130). An illustration of dolichocephalic (long-headed) and brachycephalic (round-headed) skull types is used to depict the physical variety of peoples within the category of “white” (see Figure 3); these skull types correlate to the three subdivisions of Nordic (dolichocephalic), Alpine (brachycephalic) and Mediterranean (dolichocephalic) peoples in the Northwest Quadrant (*AT* 1935: 131). The concept of the Great White Race is expanded in later chapters when Breasted introduces the Indo-Europeans – including Hittites, Persians, Greek and Romans – as the northern line of the white race, while the southern semitic line comprises Phoenicians, Hebrews, Arameans and Assyrians (*AT* 1935: 239). He sees the eventual dominance of Greece and Rome in the Near East as evidence that the Indo-European branch of the white race triumphed over the southern Semitic branch – “the complete triumph of *our* ancestors” (*AT* 1935: 240; emphasis added).

The physical anthropology that Breasted incorporated into *Ancient Times* in 1935 already had a long history in academic research. In 1869, antiquarians were comparing human skulls according to dolichocephalic, mesocephalic, and brachycephalic characteristics (defined as a ratio of skull length to skull width; e.g., Holden and Bollaert 1869). Anthropologists debated the merits of different measurement techniques for deriving a cephalic index (Garson 1887; Parsons 1924). Unfortunately, some manipulated these indices in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for xenophobic propaganda to suggest that dolichocephalic (long-headed, “Nordic”) individuals were inherently superior to



brachycephalic (broad-headed, “Alpine”) individuals (Closson 1897; see Weidenreich 1945 for a critique). Although controversial even in its time, the vocabulary that Breasted employed was therefore already established and recognized by the scientific community as a means of studying human development.

Thus, the revised edition of *Ancient Times* exhibits an increased emphasis on distinguishing between civilized and uncivilized societies and correlating civilization, race and geography – and expressing the opinion that “the teeming black world of Africa” (*AT* 1935: 133) played no part in the *civilized* realm of Africa. In fact, close attention to the language of the text reveals that Breasted was not interested in Africa at all; he states that “The only early civilized life *on the African side of the Mediterranean* was limited to a narrow strip along the shore . . . and a narrow line extending southward along the Nile” (*AT* 1935: 129; emphasis added). The phrase “African *side* of the Mediterranean” indicates that the Mediterranean is the focal point around which his construction of civilization revolves; Egypt is easily divorced from Africa by choosing 20° N as the boundary line between races, and therefore between civilized and uncivilized. This is further reinforced in the diagram of the Northwest Quadrant (Figure 2), in which geographic detail is almost completely removed, leaving only the Mediterranean as the anchor for the diagram; continents become irrelevant in this racial geography.

The language of this text is racist to contemporary ears, and there has been a negative reaction to Breasted’s work in recent decades as a result of such statements. In 1987, an editorial in *The Washington Post* entitled “The Black Roots of Egypt’s Glory” surveyed favorably the work of Cheikh Anta Diop, in which “the study of Egypt’s place

in African history is fundamental to the African renaissance”, concluding that “the Afrophobic Egyptology born of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has become a scholarship in retreat” (Finch 1987). The article opened with a quote from Breasted’s 1926 *The Conquest of Civilization*<sup>37</sup> as evidence of Afrophobic Egyptology. One month later, another editorial by a different author appeared in the same newspaper, commenting on a recent documentary that claimed Egypt was a black civilization (Mitchell 1987). The author also turned to *The Conquest of Civilization* – one of the books he remembered from his youth – to illustrate the racist views that he felt had long since permeated Egyptology. He refers to a similar passage as the previous author, in which Breasted claims that “Negroids” had no role in the rise of civilization amongst the Great White Race. Mitchell ends with a condemnation of such narrow-minded views: “In the meantime I hope it turns out that Osiris was black as the ace of spades.”

These articles, as well as the current popularity of Afrocentric Egyptology, indicate that Breasted’s views on the “Black Race”, in particular, have become the most politically resonant out of his overall discussion of race, geography and civilization. They indicate that his work for the general public is not a legacy to be ignored or overlooked. And they present us with a difficult question: how should we evaluate his assessment of the rise of civilization? In answer to this, my goal is neither to defend nor demonize Breasted’s views, but rather to *contextualize*. Though his statements about Africans are tremendously discordant with contemporary American socio-political discourse, I would suggest that from a historical standpoint his interest was perhaps not in singling out Africans, or the “Black Race”, more than any other ethnic group. As

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<sup>37</sup> *The Conquest of Civilization* was a re-working of *Ancient Times* for an adult audience; much of the text is taken almost verbatim from *Ancient Times*, including those portions regarding race, geography and civilization.

indicated above, Breasted was interested in the physical anthropology of race which was, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a common mode of scholarship. He was also concerned with the Mediterranean sphere, not the whole continents that bordered it. This decidedly Eurocentric viewpoint informed his attempt to create a scientifically definable concept of “civilization” – one that had specific material correlates in the archaeological, textual, and human skeletal record and that did, admittedly, marginalize any group of people whose cultural values did not conform to his criteria. “White”, in Breasted’s formulation, was less a construct of skin color than a construct of *achievement* and *control*. The populations that comprised Breasted’s Great White Race could have a variety of skin colors or physical features; the common denominator was their achievement of writing and control of the material resources necessary for centralized government, monumental architecture, and long-distance commerce.

As indicated by the amount of scientific work dedicated to racial categorization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Breasted was far from unique in his attempt to classify humanity – and by extension, humanity’s accomplishments – on racial grounds. The fact that his racial categories were simplistically defined and covered vast swaths of territory suggests that he was primarily concerned with identifying the material forms of *civilization*, and his racial geography followed on this concept such that his ingrained prejudices were translated onto a map of humanity’s progress. He was constructing a narrative of human history in which the advancement of societies through stages of development – even when that advancement necessitated warfare and exploitation – was given order and meaning by imposing a unity upon the bearers of this progress. That unity was the Great White Race. In Breasted’s day, the equivalent of that “Great White

Race” – America and the European powers – were descending into trench warfare and mass destruction. However, such measures were seen as justifiable for the cause of advancing or preserving *civilization*, as evidenced by the expansion and conflict that characterized the civilized societies of the past, who were, Breasted constantly reminds us, our direct cultural forebears. Thus, history, regardless of what it entails, is not inherently chaotic; it is *ordered* – given that the carriers of progress are members of that race which had, for Breasted, become the representative of civilized life in the present.

### **C. Enlightened Exploitation and Warfare**

The final point in Breasted’s narrative of human progress was one that he carried on from *A History of Egypt*. In that earlier work, warfare and conflict is almost always expressed as a means of acquiring material resources needed for the maintenance and expansion of civilized society. Thus, the Egyptians conducted “enterprises” in Sinai (*HE* 48), “punishing” rebellious Bedouin tribes whose resistance or raids stood in the way of industrial progress (*ibid.* 134-135). That the Egyptians were entitled to control the Nubian trade routes, regardless of the bloody campaigns needed to quell Nubian revolt, is indicated by Breasted’s observation that these routes were an absolute necessity for the Egyptian economy, whereas the Nubian tribes were still in a stage of barbarism (*HE* 135-136). The vocabulary of conflict in *A History of Egypt* repeatedly employs phrases such as “punitive expeditions” (*HE* 135), “chastising” of barbarians (*HE* 48; 179; 301; 315), and punishment for the “predatory incursions” (*HE* 331) of Nubian or Bedouin tribes on land that the Egyptians are exploiting for material wealth.

This theme continues in *Ancient Times* and is even compared to modern imperial conditions. Breasted maintains that the ancient Egyptian canals connecting the Red Sea

to the Nile were as crucial for Egyptian commercial success as the Panama Canal for Americans or the Suez Canal for the English (*AT* 102). It is ironic that control over access to the Red Sea trade routes is what first brought Napoleon's army to Egypt in 1798, resulting in several years of armed conflict with both the Mamluks and the English; such consequences of commercial expansion are condoned in the interest of progress by the civilized nations. Vandkilde (2003: 128) has discussed this phenomenon in more recent archaeological writing, in which warfare is rationalized or idealized through the use of "soft metaphors". In the case of Breasted's work, soft metaphors are bolstered by an ideology of *enlightened exploitation*.

This key phrase is used by Breasted in the context of modern economic activity and it gives significant insight into his interpretation of the career of man. In "The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago" (1919b: 196-197), he refers to the enlightened exploitation occurring in the Near East since the end of World War I in the form of mining, railroads, and manufacturing.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, economic exploitation (and its social, political, and military consequences) is a natural part of developed societies when an industrial culture is in need of material resources to sustain its march of progress. This finds its clearest articulation in the three-part "Origins of Civilization" for *The Scientific Monthly*. Breasted claims that Pharaonic expeditions into Sinai were an impressive example of acquiring the "metallic resources without which man could no longer carry on a great state. . . . Here is the earliest sovereign to follow economic dictates and to march into a neighboring continent to seize by sole right of might the mineral wealth which his people needed" (1919e: 567-568). Though this sentiment had

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<sup>38</sup> He also used the phrase in the same context when writing to the Rockefeller General Education Board about the current state of the Middle East in 1919. JHB to Buttrick, January 13, 1919; folder 6851, box 659, RG GEB 1.4, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

been expressed more subtly in *A History of Egypt* and *Ancient Times*, in the aftermath of the war Breasted did not conceal the connections he was drawing between the processes of ancient and modern imperialism. He could not have been more explicit when he wrote:

Thus the earliest known autocracy, seizing the mineral-bearing regions of Asia which it needed, some 5,300 years ago, began that long career of aggression based on economic grounds, which continuing ever since culminated in the seizure of the mineral wealth of northern France in August, 1914. (Breasted 1919e: 569)

This interpretation of ancient and modern imperialism returns us to an observation of Breasted's that was quoted in the previous chapter. Relating the events of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904, in which European and non-European were pitted against each other, he claimed that "The fate of a continent and *the supremacy of a race* is being decided every day" (emphasis added).<sup>39</sup> In Breasted's view, the conquest of civilization is the conquest of material resources for the sake of industrial and social progress, and those who successfully conquer prove their cultural supremacy through the enlightened use they make of those resources. As he claimed in *A History of Egypt*, art and architecture are the "noblest fruits" of imperial impulses (*HE* 417); he explained for the youth of America in *Ancient Times* that *captured* wealth led the Egyptians to new heights in art, architecture, urban planning, and even the concept of the world-god (*AT* 108 ff.). The colonial lesson was reinforced when, at the end of the section on Egypt, he asked the students to reflect on the question: "What did the Egyptian emperors do with the wealth gained from subject peoples"? In case they might have forgotten one of the most

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<sup>39</sup> JHB to his mother, June 9, 1904; James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

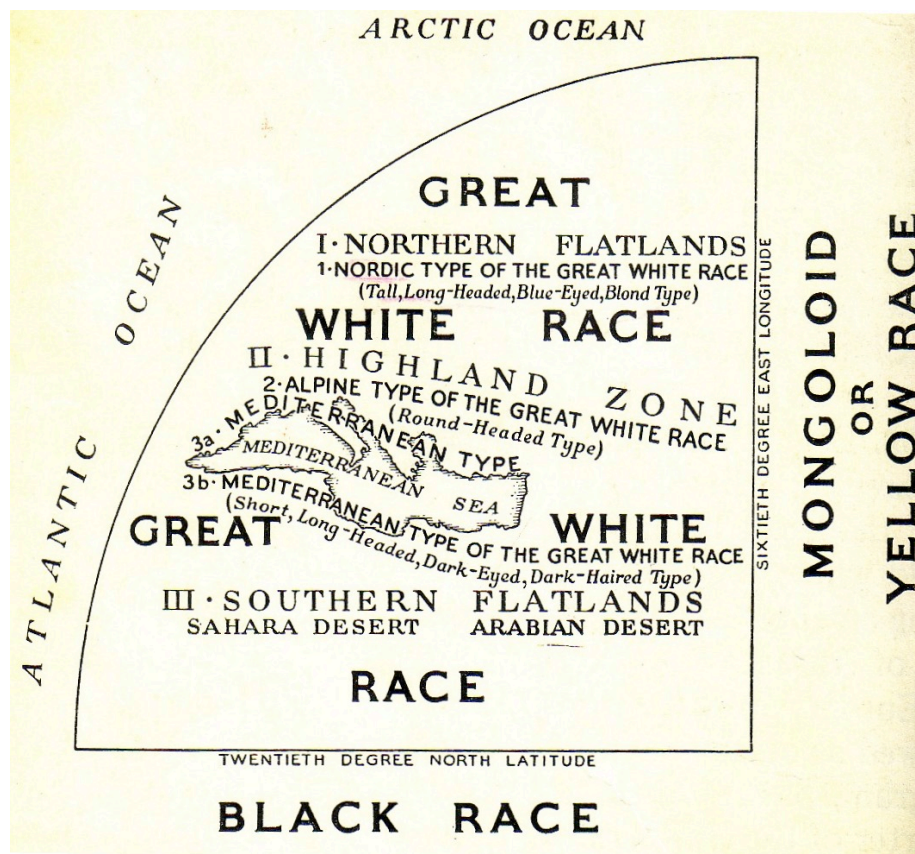
important benefits of expansion, he prompted them to discuss the earliest belief in one god (*AT* 127).

This reminder of religion anticipates the following chapter, which will discuss Breasted's interpretation of Egyptian religion and the development of human conscience in relation to the more materialistic concerns that occupied the majority of *Ancient Times*. The imperial politics of the era, the surge in prehistoric archaeology, and Breasted's plans to join the humanistic and natural sciences in one overarching institution all combined to make *Ancient Times* a survey of the material and economic processes by which societies grew to manipulate and control their environments. Breasted sought to demonstrate to students in 1916 that the forces and conflicts they saw in operation all around them were a part of their heritage as civilized peoples. Those who didn't live according to the rules of industrialism, militarism and technological advancement – such as indigenous Americans – were quaint reminders of a prehistoric era.

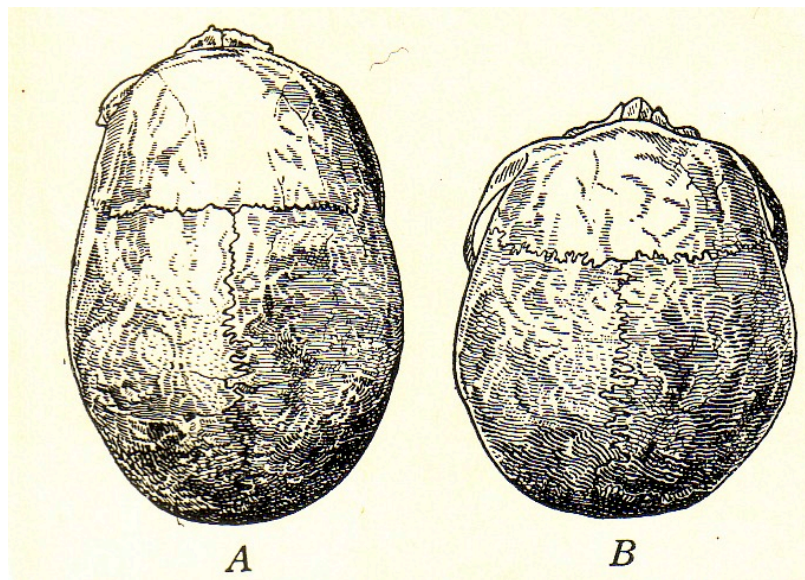


**Figure 1:** Map of the Northwest Quadrant with superimposed racial categories. From the revised second edition of *Ancient Times*, Breasted 1935: 13.





**Figure 2:** Schematic version of the Northwest Quadrant with racial categories. From the revised second edition of *Ancient Times*, Breasted 1935: 130.



**Figure 3:** Illustration of a dolicocephalic skull (A) and a brachycephalic skull (B). From the revised second edition of *Ancient Times*, Breasted 1935: 131.

## Chapter 5

### Social Idealism in a Changing World

From 1942 to 1944, while England was in the midst of yet another horrific world war, C.S. Lewis broadcasted a series of radio programs in which he attempted to explain the basic tenets of Christianity to a skeptical generation. Later published as *Mere Christianity*, his talks dealt first with the concepts of morality and ethics, as a nation at war struggled with the question of whether there was absolute right and an absolute wrong in the behavior of humans. He proposed a Law of Human Nature – an inner understanding of right and wrong – which all humans possess and which he equated with morality, or in his words, “decent behavior” (Lewis 2001: 9). Lewis accepted the idea that the human understanding of morality progressively improves over time, but he maintained that this moral law was not invented by humans. It exists as a real entity driven by a purposeful mind – God – the origin of which is not within the bounds of science to answer (ibid. 21 ff.).

In 1934, Breasted also wrote a book for a skeptical young generation which was experiencing troubling times – the almost total collapse of the American economy and the rise of Fascism in Europe, a continent still recovering from the destruction of a war less than twenty years in the past. Breasted shared Lewis’ concern for morality and the origin of ethical imperatives; however, as a scholar who believed in the explanatory capacity of science, his book put forth rather different conclusions. The central argument of *The Dawn of Conscience (DC)* – and also of *Development of Religion and Thought in*

*Ancient Egypt (DRT)*<sup>1</sup> – was that morality, social idealism, and the characterization of the divine was a result of social evolution, rather than revelation. Evolving conscience was the product of *human experience*; as such, exclusive revelation to a particular group of people is not a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of religion. This aspect of Breasted's work generated controversy in his own time<sup>2</sup> and was the element that guided the classification of Breasted as a secular humanist.<sup>3</sup>

Labeling Breasted's work as that of either a secular humanist or a believer is, I will argue, a complex question that is not well served by simply emphasizing his declaration of evolution over revelation. There are subtler narrative lines that deserve our attention as well. I will demonstrate below that the core ideas put forth in *The Dawn of Conscience* emerged gradually out of Breasted's work from the previous thirty years; in fact, his interpretation of evolving morality can only be fully understood in the context of his earlier writings. When *The Dawn of Conscience* is seen to be in dialogue with *A History of Egypt, Development of Religion and Thought*, and *Ancient Times*, certain unresolved threads of these earlier books become more fully illuminated. In particular, a narrative of agrarian fantasy – locating morality in a bucolic environment – emerges as a pattern that can be detected as early as 1905.

Despite the gradual development of the ideas in his final book, Breasted does add another element that takes his writing in a new direction at this late stage of his career.

*The Dawn of Conscience* is a book explicitly concerned with the relevance of the ancient

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<sup>1</sup> *The Dawn of Conscience* was a re-working of the earlier *Development of Religion and Thought*, in much the same way that *Conquest of Civilization* was a later version of *Ancient Times*. Much of the text of *Dawn of Conscience* is, in fact, taken verbatim from *Development of Religion and Thought*; consequently, the two books will sometimes be discussed as a unit.

<sup>2</sup> For example, "Breasted's Book Brings Worry to Nation's Clergy", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 10, 1935; and "Thrust at Old Beliefs Rouses Church Leaders", *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> See Kuklick 1996: 122; 184 ff. for a discussion of Breasted's humanism and W.F. Albright's perception of him as a secularist.

past to the modern world, especially with regard to the applicability of historical knowledge to our own understanding of human nature. Breasted calls for unity and optimism, and in this he built a relationship between historical/archaeological knowledge and social action, despite the mixed reviews which the work generated. The relevance of the past to the present is what led John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to invest in Breasted's academic endeavors, revealing the critical importance of popular, synthetic books in the establishment of the Oriental Institute and, by extension, a large part of Oriental studies in America.

### **I. Evolution, Not Revelation**

Although interpretations of religion were not the focus of Breasted's earlier synthetic works, such as *A History of Egypt* and *Ancient Times*, neither was religion entirely absent from the discussion. The *History* reveals that Breasted was already expressing a disdain for magical or supernatural elements in religious practice. Though he was intent on establishing Egyptian supremacy, both chronologically and technologically, in those avenues which he considered indices of civilization, he also lamented the presence of magic among the populace. Reliance on magical spells, particularly in the realm of medicine, hindered the Egyptians' progress toward real scientific achievement (*HE* 101). The expression of deities in animal forms was also considered to be a trait of "primitive fancy" (*HE* 54); when animal cults became increasingly popular in the Late Period, Breasted saw this as evidence for regression and decline (*HE* 60).

The priesthood was suspect as well, for they were the propagators of many of these regressive tendencies. Encouraging a belief in magical spells led to sales of

papyrus scrolls of the Book of the Dead (*HE* 175-176); animal cults were another way of securing profit via the sale of animal mummies. In the proliferation of *ushabti* figures in tombs, the varieties of demons and deities depicted in the netherworld books of the New Kingdom, and the rising political power of the high priest of Amen at Thebes, Breasted saw a “subversion of moral progress” (*HE* 250), a stifling of higher ideals by the priesthood’s willingness to sell assurances into the afterlife. He wrote in no uncertain terms of his rejection of all elements that he considered unworthy of true moral or spiritual reflection: the New Kingdom Egyptians’ conception of the afterlife was full of “base and repulsive devices, which the perverted imagination of a stupid priesthood had imposed upon an implicit people” (*HE* 370).

Thus does Breasted’s vocabulary reflect a Western, and specifically Protestant, understanding of the relative values of religious expression. His dismissive attitude toward the priesthood and their selling of “assurances” echoes the Protestant rejection of Catholic hierarchy and the belief in indulgences.<sup>4</sup> His bias is also clear in those aspects which he favors. He emphasizes any evidence of abstract thought, philosophical reasoning, and ethical standards. Thus, the Egyptian empire is celebrated for having led to the idea of a “world-god” endowed with a single creative intelligence (*HE* 358), which in turn led to Akhenaten’s awareness of a beneficent god concerned with all of humanity (*HE* 377). Even the Book of the Dead, despite its focus on magical formulae, contains a kernel of what Breasted considers to be universal truth: the negative confession, in which

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<sup>4</sup> Protestant-Catholic tension was a defining feature of late 19<sup>th</sup> century American life, particularly in the public school system (Prothero 2008: 121 ff.), and it may have informed Breasted’s youth. One of the most evocative depictions of anti-Catholic sentiment appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1871. Artist Thomas Nast drew a satirical cartoon in which crocodiles emerge from the “American river Ganges” to threaten a Protestant teacher and his students. The crocodiles are actually Catholic bishops – their mitres form the head, jaws and teeth, and their elaborate vestments are the scales of the crocodiles’ backs (see Dewey 2007: 171).

the deceased enumerates crimes which he did *not* commit in life, exhibits an ethical standard familiar to inhabitants of the modern world (*HE* 173).

Breasted's Eurocentric bias should not be seen as an attempt to justify the validity of Christian revelation.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, the divine attributes of universalism, goodwill, and fatherliness toward all humanity – attributes that he sees in the Aten and for which he praises Akhenaten's awareness – are similar to those of Jesus, a statement which he also makes explicit (*HE* 377). However, Breasted is interested in demonstrating that a "higher" consciousness of morality and divine attributes is not dependent on revelation, but is in fact a result of social evolution. Thus, in the *History* it is political conditions that largely influence the development, or upward progress, of religion. The gradual discovery of monotheism – for Breasted does attribute earliest monotheism to Akhenaten – had its roots in the Middle Kingdom, when priests declared their local gods to be forms of Re for the purpose of political gain (*HE* 170-171). Imperial politics further established the supremacy of the Egyptian god over all others. Here, in scattered references throughout the text, is one of Breasted's earlier arguments that spiritual development arises from human experience, particularly political experience.

It was argued in Chapter 3 that explanations of social change in *A History of Egypt* follow both evolutionary and diffusionist modes of thought. In treating religion as another phenomenon of cultural evolution, aspects of which diffused to other parts of the Near East, Breasted does not, at this point in his career, invest religion with a significantly more important role than other phenomena. By the time of *The Dawn of Conscience*, however, he would describe the emergence of "character" as the most

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Breasted's approach to Biblical criticism and the way in which it differed from David Gange's (2006) description of 19<sup>th</sup> century British Egyptology, refer to Chapter 3, pp. 76-80.

important development in the history of humanity (*DC* xvi). But before this came both *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (1912) and *Ancient Times* (1916).

As discussed in Chapter 4, *Ancient Times* emphasized the conquest of the material world and concrete indices of civilized life. In this context, religious development in Egypt is placed alongside material and technological advances, rather than correlated primarily with political developments.<sup>6</sup> One of the clearest examples of this is a chart included in both editions of *Ancient Times* that depicts the transition from “barbarism” to “civilization” through the lens of monumental architecture (see Figure 4). In the caption, Breasted notes that such architecture, along with metallurgy, writing, centralized government and industrialism, were the determining factors in this transition. But then he makes a further point that allies, though only implicitly, morality with material progress: he instructs his student readers to note that these visible manifestations of civilization existed alongside *invisible* markers of civilization that emerged at the same time; namely, “the belief in right living, in kindness to others, and that a good life here was the only thing which could bring happiness in the next world” (*AT* 1916: 55; *AT* 1935: 73). In accordance with the themes of *Ancient Times* that were discussed in Chapter 4 – an emphasis on delineating civilization geographically and racially – Breasted constructs a picture of society in which less industrially developed peoples are also implied to be less *spiritually* developed. Though he rejects the notion of exclusive revelation, the capacity for moral and ethical progress is rendered as dependent on material qualities of civilization.

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<sup>6</sup> The exception is Akhenaten’s perceived monotheism; Breasted maintained throughout his career that it was partially based on the experience of territorial and political expansion: “monotheism is but imperialism in religion” (*DRT* 315).

This idea finds more explicit expression in *Development of Religion and Thought*. It preceded *Ancient Times* by four years, but the vast amount of material covered in the latter book necessitated a more simplistic discussion; the correlation between material and moral progress receives a fuller explanation in the book devoted to religion. Breasted's overall intention was the same for both *Ancient Times* and *Development of Religion and Thought* – to explicate the large forces that drive civilization and progress (*DRT* viii). Unlike other books on ancient Egyptian religion,<sup>7</sup> Breasted's did not catalogue Egyptian deities, or present a picture of religion compartmentalized into various topics such as “literature”, “popular religion”, etc. His intention was to follow a specific line of inquiry throughout the book: the emergence of morality, ethics and social idealism in Egypt.<sup>8</sup> In Breasted's formulation, the rise of centralized government and controlled resources corresponded to “the voices within [making] themselves heard . . . for the first time” (*DRT* 5). Although his explanation for the original source of this “inner voice” of morality is always somewhat vague, he implies that it is an inherent but latent quality, the evolution of which is dependent on the material progress of civilization. Thus, the Pyramid Texts are documents “from which we may draw fuller knowledge of the *more developed faith* of a people rising rapidly toward a *high material civilization* and a unified governmental organization, the first great state of antiquity” (*DRT* 50; emphasis added).

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Tiele's *History of the Egyptian Religion* (1882); Wiedemann's *Religion of the Ancient Egyptians* (1897); Budge's *Gods of the Egyptians* (1904); Petrie's *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* (1908); and Sayce's *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* (1913).

<sup>8</sup> Breasted's was not the first foray into studying conscience in ancient Egypt. In 1898 Petrie published *Religion and Conscience in Ancient Egypt*, which began, as did *Development of Religion and Thought*, as a series of lectures. Petrie attempted to discern laws of human thoughts; curiously, he used probability curves representing modern monetary contributions to the British Exchequer as an example demonstrating that conscience is a variable subject to the laws of averages (Petrie 1920: 59 ff.).



One of the most interesting interpretations in *Development of Religion and Thought* is that regarding the Pyramid Texts. Breasted claims that they represent a critical transition point from a reliance on purely material means of achieving an afterlife to the awareness of a moral imperative. Construction technology – and its ultimate limitations, as it reaches a point where bigger is no longer an option – is depicted as the catalyst in emerging conscience: the Pyramid Texts, located within much smaller, less materially impressive pyramids, indicate “the abandonment of the titanic struggle with material forces and an evident resort to less tangible agencies. . . . It was the beginning of a shift of emphasis from objective advantages to subjective qualities” (*DRT* 179). Thus, the *conquest* of the material world, as well as a recognition of its inherent *limitations*, was a necessary precursor to the evolution of morality and ethics. In this light, Breasted’s claims about the geo-racial boundaries of civilization in *Ancient Times* take on added significance. The “Black Race”, the “Mongoloid Race”, and modern indigenous peoples had little to no influence on the development of civilization not only because they were industrially less advanced, but also because they did not push the physical and conceptual limitations of the material world. Their *experience* of the world was, according to Breasted’s view, too impoverished to afford them the capacity to reflect on inner values. The rise of skepticism in later periods – illustrated in such texts as Harpers’ Songs – is also attributed to meditations on landscape. The crumbling and robbed tomb complexes of the Old Kingdom inspired critical reflection on beliefs of the afterlife and inherited tradition. It was an evolutionary step taken by a people of “ripe civilization” (*DRT* 181).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Breasted also maintains that the experience of the socio-political fragmentation of the First Intermediate Period cultivated the “necessary detachment” to analyze societal ills as seen in the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*; additionally, the Middle Kingdom texts that prophesize the coming of a just king are not seen primarily as propaganda for an already-existing dynasty, but as “the earliest emergence of a social idealism which

## II. Locating Morality

Mortuary landscapes were not the only kind of landscape that influenced the evolution of moral values. In Breasted's early written work, such as *A History of Egypt*, a dichotomy emerges between rural and urban living. At this early stage, it is not yet a fully formed or consistent set of ideas, but over the course of his career he would expand upon this theme, adding further elements related to social class and family life. A narrative of agrarian fantasy became imbued with social idealism in *Development of Religion and Thought*, and by the time he wrote *The Dawn of Conscience*, the nuclear family was celebrated as the core of moral evolution.

In the *History*, Breasted turned to Old Kingdom mastaba tomb scenes to describe daily life on agricultural estates of the landowning class. The "benevolent" landowner and his family lived in houses that were spacious, airy, and decorated with beautifully functional objects made of luxurious materials. The head of the household – "the gentleman of the day" (*HE* 88-89) – would benignly supervise the running of his estate and its workers; in his spare time he indulged his passion for nature, sports, and hunting. Gardens and ponds were locations for leisurely activities such as music, singing, and dancing, in which the nobleman gathered his wife and children about him to enjoy the finer things in life. Breasted refers to this scene as the "noble's paradise" (*HE* 88 ff.), which he believes reflected the actual life of the cultured elite, as well as the idealized world of the afterlife.

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among the Hebrews we call 'Messianism'" (*DRT* 215). Interestingly, Breasted's confidence in referencing Messianism amongst a popular audience seems to have increased over time. In the 1916 edition of *Ancient Times*, he mentions these Middle Kingdom didactic texts but with no mention of Messianism (*AT* 1916: 76); in the revised 1935 edition, the same paragraph has an extra sentence inserted: "Thus arose the earliest dream of a Messiah" (*AT* 1935: 96).

What is most significant in this characterization is that he constructs an image of a country estate that evokes Western (and colonial) lifestyles, and then correlates this lifestyle with moral values while contrasting it with the urban poor. The rural estates encouraged a “wholesome and sunny view of life” (*HE* 91) that “foster[ed] simplicity and wholesome country virtues on a large domain” (*HE* 339). This rustic lifestyle was also beneficial to those who worked on the estates, as they engaged in wholesome and productive industry (*HE* 205); indeed, to be in servitude on a large estate was to live a more stable and morally sound life than that which characterized the urban poor (*HE* 86). It is in describing urban conditions that Breasted makes some of his most unsubstantiated claims, revealing the degree to which he could impose his own prejudices on the material record. Looking at a site map of Lahun from Petrie’s excavations, Breasted saw this planned settlement not as an example of effective government organization but as a setting for “gross immorality”:

The outward conditions of the lower class were not such as would incline toward moral living. In the towns their low mud-brick, thatch-roofed houses were crowded into groups and masses, so huddled together that walls were often contiguous. A rough stool, a rude box or two, and a few crude pottery jars constituted the furniture of such a hovel. . . . On the great estates, the life of the poor was freer, less congested and promiscuous... (*HE* 86)

Such statements stand out discordantly in the text as there is nothing to support the correlation of Lahun’s layout with immoral lifestyles. It is important to note that this passage is based on the material record of the settlement, rather than on the textual sources that Breasted typically draws from. Although there is no direct evidence for his opinions on urban planning in his own contemporary context, it is possible that the visual image of the tightly packed grid of workmen’s houses in Lahun was reminiscent, for a

scholar in 1905, of the tenement housing in American cities. In 1890, Jacob Riis had published *How the Other Half Lives*, a book documenting in text, etchings, photographs and *floor plans* the poverty of the living conditions in the tenements of New York's Lower East Side. Riis also wrote of the immorality that attended these conditions: "...in the tenements all the influences make for evil . . . above all, they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion" (Riis [1890] 2004: xx-xxi). Government reports echoed Riis' views, stating that the tenements "soon became filled with from cellar to garret with a class of tenantry living from hand to mouth, loose in morals, improvident in habits, degraded, and squalid as beggary itself" (ibid. 2). Closer to the appearance of Breasted's *History*, Jacob Riis published a sequel in 1902, *The Battle with the Slum*. In it he describes in graphic detail the almost total lack of sunlight, air and sanitation in densely inhabited city blocks (Riis [1902] 1998: 22-23). In this cultural context, Breasted's continual references to "wholesome" influences of the countryside and nature can perhaps be seen as reflecting the attitudes of the middle class in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The image of the noble's paradise appears in condensed form in *Ancient Times*. Again the landowner is depicted as a benevolent patron of culture, providing an environment for music, dance, sport, and other wholesome entertainments (*AT* 1916: 67). However, in the revised version of *Ancient Times*, one more sentence is added to this tableau which had otherwise been reproduced verbatim: "From these pictures we learn for the first time that, after several hundred thousand years of Stone Age savagery and barbarism, family life was beginning to bring a kindly spirit into the lives of men" (*AT* 1935: 85). This addition reflects the development that Breasted's thought on morality

had undergone between the writing of *Development of Religion and Thought* in 1912 and *Dawn of Conscience* in 1934.

In *Development of Religion and Thought*, the agrarian fantasy established in the *History* – a fantasy of benevolent landowners, happy workers, and the nourishing moral environment of the countryside – became imbued with a sense of class distinction as well. The vision of an afterlife that mirrored the country estate, which Breasted perceived as a more highly developed vision than a subterranean underworld (*DRT* 69), was a phenomenon he saw originating in the elite stratum of society. Additionally, the vocabulary which he had formerly used to describe the noble's paradise was now applied to the concept of social justice, with the elite landowning class at its source. Thus, royal officials “held wholesome and practical principles of right living” (*DRT* 216); social justice to the poor was “a breath of that wholesome moral atmosphere which pervades the social thinking of the official class” (*DRT* 226). When this is read in light of his earlier *History*, we are reminded of the characterization of the country estate as a wholesome and moral environment; thus is the location for moral development transferred from the country estate to the official classes in general. The negative descriptions of magic and its erosion of moral progress (see pages 137-138, above) are associated with a gullible lower class and a corrupt priesthood, serving as a foil against which to cast the more enlightened, educated, and landowning populace (read: country gentlemen).

Another element that emerged in *Development of Religion and Thought* was an emphasis on the nuclear family as a locus of morality. Osiris, Isis, and Horus embodied the family values of “wifely fidelity and filial devotion” (*DRT* 37), which Breasted interpreted as the values of everyday human experience transferred to the characters of

the gods. The theme of family life was emphasized further in *Dawn of Conscience*, in which it became the primary source of moral progress and social idealism. In this book, the narrative of agrarian morality that began in the *History* reaches its culmination. The noble's paradise is combined with praise of the nuclear family in an interpretation in which the country estate is not only wholesome for its environmental aspects, but also in the relationships it produces between family members. Father, mother and children play together, hunt together, inspect the estate together, and in general revel in the nourishing influences of nature (DC 119 ff.). Breasted concludes that:

There is one supreme human relationship, that which has created the home and made the family fireside the source out of which man's highest qualities have grown up to transform the world. As historical fact, it is to family life that we owe the greatest debt which the mind of man can conceive. (DC 411)

Possible reasons for this increased emphasis on the morality of family life – and its insertion into the agrarian fantasy in both *Dawn of Conscience* and the revised edition of *Ancient Times* – are provided by Breasted himself. On the one hand, he was reacting to Bertrand Russell's *Education and the Social Order*, in which Breasted found the Communist sentiment of abandoning traditional family life to be in opposition to what human experience – as recorded in the Egyptian evidence – reveals as the source of a moral life (DC 410). Additionally, Breasted's references to works of social psychology in the passages on family life indicate that he was influenced by the theories of William McDougall and Edvard Westermarck (DC 121-122).

Such an emphasis on the nuclear family in Breasted's later writing raises the issue of his own personal family life and the degree to which it may have influenced his perception of family as a moral force. However, this is a difficult issue to address as the

only published source on the relationships between the members of the Breasted family is *Pioneer to the Past: The Story of James Henry Breasted, Archaeologist* (1943), written by Breasted's eldest son Charles. It is far from an unbiased view his father's life, particularly with regard to the relationship between James and his wife Frances. Charles described his father as having an "un-understanding" of women: "His attitude toward them then [in 1891], as later in life, was essentially sentimental, a quaint mixture of knightly chivalry and circumspectly torrid Victorian ardor" (*Pioneer* 28). His mother is portrayed as a woman with a nervous and temperamental disposition, for whom "everyday life was . . . a constant struggle" (*ibid.* 218). In Charles' view, his father was the long-suffering voice of reason, while his mother's peace of mind was largely dependent on her husband's solicitude:

The sound of his voice gave her a comforting sense of proximity to his mind, stimulated her powers of comprehension just as her music used to do. But when it had ceased, when he had inserted a marker, closed the book and risen from his chair to lock the doors and windows for the night, she gradually sank again into the quicksands of tomorrow's household anxieties. (*ibid.* 219)

These descriptions do not mention the humor and affection that often characterized Breasted's references to his family life during their time in Berlin in the early 1900s. In his correspondence he writes with great wit about his and Frances' battles against the sometimes unsanitary conditions in their Berlin apartment,<sup>10</sup> about their daily walks in the Tiergarten,<sup>11</sup> and the small nightly rituals of the Breasted household.<sup>12</sup> However, it is more difficult to correlate the state of Breasted's family life late in his

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<sup>10</sup> JHB to his mother, September 17, 1899; James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>11</sup> JHB to his mother, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1904; James H. Breasted Papers, 1897-1908, Box 5, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

career with the writing of *Dawn of Conscience*. The salient point of comparison is between Breasted's own perception of his family life and his portrayal of the nuclear family as a locus of morality. At present, any such correlation would be largely speculative and would not contribute substantially to the analysis presented here.

### III. The Uses of Religion

This chapter has illustrated the development of Breasted's thought on Egyptian morality and ethics over the course of his career. His final statement of the subject, *The Dawn of Conscience*, was largely comprised of text taken directly from *Development of Religion and Thought*.<sup>13</sup> The most significant changes to *The Dawn of Conscience* were the addition of an introduction and an epilogue in which Breasted moralized to his audience, making explicit his views on the uses of religion in the modern world. Indeed, on the subject of Breasted and religion, "use" is perhaps the most appropriate term with which to structure the discussion. His academic writing shows a disinterest in organized religion per se, focusing instead on the evolution of ethical ideals and abstract concepts of divinity. His own religious beliefs vacillated throughout his lifetime, and by the time he wrote *The Dawn of Conscience* they were no longer clear even to his close associates. After his death, Alan Gardiner wrote, "An innate reserve restrained him from dwelling much on personal feelings, and, intimately as I knew him, to this day his exact religious position is unknown to me."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Also, chapter 1 of *DC* was an almost verbatim reproduction of his 1925 article "The New Past".

<sup>14</sup> Alan Gardiner, "Professor Breasted – Dr. Alan Gardiner's Tribute", *The Times*, December 5, 1935; Issue 47239, Col. B, pg. 21.



Breasted was raised in a Congregationalist<sup>15</sup> household that strictly observed the Sabbath and supported the temperance movement. Although he abandoned his goals for the ministry in favor of academia, his correspondence reveals that his evangelical upbringing was still with him, at least early in his career. Writing from Berlin, he noted that religion in Germany tended toward formalism, lacking all of the spontaneity that makes true religion “a faculty of the human heart” (*Pioneer* 48). Later in his career he would veer to the side of secular science, writing to George Ellery Hale in 1926: “We are both overloaded already, but if America is to be saved from the Fundamentalists,<sup>16</sup> I think we men of science are more likely to do it than the men of the churches.”<sup>17</sup> In writing to Abraham Flexner of the Rockefeller Foundation’s General Education Board, he encouraged the writing of textbooks that would illustrate the “secular aspect” of the human career, placing humanity within the scope of geological time and the evolution of the universe. Such a perspective would, he insisted, “engender that reverence for *the life of man on earth*” (emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

Despite the complexity of his own religious views, he showed savvy in using religion when necessary for the benefit of his work and the Oriental Institute. His patron,

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<sup>15</sup> Congregationalism is a Protestant denomination closely related to Presbyterianism and with roots in Puritanism. Committed to the autonomy of each individual congregation, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Congregationalism was associated with social reform, such as the antislavery movement (see Pearson 1969).

<sup>16</sup> At the time Breasted wrote this letter, tension between liberal theologians and fundamentalists was a prominent topic in Protestant Christianity. Fundamentalism was rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible and a belief in premillennialism – that Jesus will return to the world and establish a thousand-year reign of peace and justice (see Nichols 1925 for a review of fundamentalism contemporary with Breasted’s era). In 1922, Baptist minister and proponent of liberal theology Harry Emerson Fosdick (brother of Raymond Fosdick, later the president of the Rockefeller Foundation) preached a sermon in the First Presbyterian Church of New York in which he spoke out against the intolerance of fundamentalists (see Miller 1985).

<sup>17</sup> JHB to Hale, June 24, 1926; James H. Breasted Papers, Correspondence with George Ellery Hale, Courtesy of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

<sup>18</sup> JHB to Abraham Flexner, June 5, 1925; folder 6851, box 659, series 1.4, RG General Education Board, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was a man of even stricter upbringing than Breasted himself. Rockefeller's father was a Baptist and his mother a Congregationalist, and she ran her household with a firm commitment to piety and modest behavior – dancing, card playing, and socializing on Sundays were strictly forbidden (Kert 1993: 94). Like Breasted, the Rockefellers expressed an opposition to Fundamentalists (Ernst 1994: 123) and disliked formal church hierarchy (Chernow 1998: 51). Perhaps Breasted saw in Rockefeller a person of similar background to himself. In writing requests for funding, he would subtly – not overbearingly – appeal to Rockefeller's religious perspective. He reinforced the idea that his research uncovered the process of human development that led to *our Christian civilization*.<sup>19</sup> He reminded Rockefeller that his support would make possible “the noblest task in the study of man”, which was to trace humanity's progress toward a “religion of divine fatherhood and human brotherhood”.<sup>20</sup> In making an appeal for a new building to house the Oriental Institute's growing collection of antiquities, he put forth his most explicit reference to religion:

It would form a unique shrine of rising human idealism proclaiming its high mission to all our younger generation, but not least to our young historians and our young theologians who would be able to follow from hall to hall, race by race, and stage by stage, the gradual dawning of the great Light that reached its culmination in the life of Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

This appeal must be seen in the context of a man attempting to secure not only a building, but a permanent endowment for the Oriental Institute. In his written work, Breasted expressed a slightly different opinion. Humanity's moral progress was not

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<sup>19</sup> JHB to Rockefeller, April 4, 1929; folder 368, box 41, series 2, RG III 2Z, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

<sup>20</sup> JHB to Rockefeller, February 16, 1919; folder 812, box 112, RG III 2G, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

<sup>21</sup> JHB to Rockefeller, December 19, 1927; folder 23, box 2, series 1, RG 2 OMR-AAR Papers, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

completed in Jesus; on the contrary, the emergence of social idealism was still in its infancy (*DC* x). The processes of developing character from an initially characterless universe (*DC* xv) were still ongoing, and it was this that Breasted pointed to as evidence for a promising future. That our conscience would continue to evolve beyond our mechanically destructive capacities was the hopeful message of *The Dawn of Conscience*. For some, however, the declaration that morality evolved from experience, rather than divine revelation, was anything but comforting. In a *New York Times* review for *Development of Religion and Thought*, the absence of revelation elicited the following response: “I believe that such theories of religion as this are comfortless, purposeless, full of poison. . . . We may not agree with Dr. Breasted’s conclusion, but his facts are of extreme value”.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps for that reviewer, *Development of Religion and Thought* was missing precisely that which Breasted added to *Dawn of Conscience* – an explanation of how humans’ ability to achieve character in a characterless universe is the greatest and most inspiring part of the human story. At least one reviewer was swayed to Breasted’s position. George Barton, in *The American Historical Review*, wrote “he [Breasted] has in the present work laid the foundation for a new and better theology” (Barton 1935: 498). And in the opinion of Raymond Fosdick (1962: 237), a former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, it was Breasted’s ability to unite archaeology and social idealism that made him a success and the Oriental Institute a reality.

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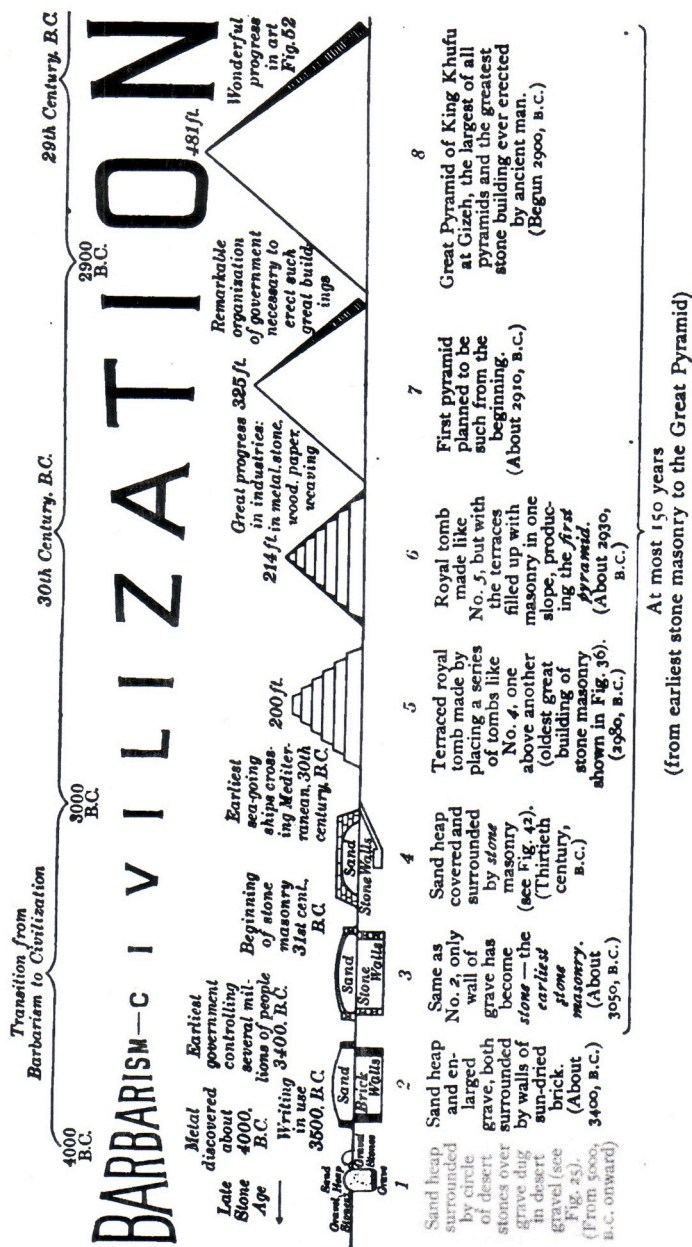
<sup>22</sup> “The Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and of Jacob Boehme”, *New York Times*, September 29, 1912.

“Can you imagine Cairo without Shepheard’s?” So wrote Gerald Delany, former chief correspondent for Reuters’ Middle East bureau, to Charles Breasted in 1952.<sup>23</sup> In January of that year, the famous hotel had been destroyed by fire during riots against foreign institutions, part of the revolution that eventually saw Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Free Officers Movement overthrow the Egyptian monarchy. Though James Henry Breasted did not live to see the climatic turbulence of 1952, his writing indicates that the global conflicts he did witness in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were enough to make him worry about humanity’s faith in itself. By the time of his death in December of 1935, he had seen the tragedies of World War I, the Great Depression, and the rise of Mussolini and Hitler. Though both editions of *Ancient Times* had maintained a generally positive attitude toward technological and industrial progress, *The Dawn of Conscience* revealed his concern for the destructive capacity of our technological ingenuity. A focus on humanity’s evolving *moral* capacities was not entirely absent from his previous writings, but his final book took the subject of religion and social idealism to a level of interaction with the public beyond that which his earlier work had attempted. As Breasted said in 1933, “You take the human drama seriously. . . . All that counts for us is character”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Delany to Charles Breasted, August 17, 1952; folder 360, box 49, RG III 2H, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

<sup>24</sup> “Saver of Cities Sailing Today for Near East”, *New York Herald Tribune*, February 4, 1933.



**Figure 4:** Chart depicting the transition from “barbarism” to “civilization”, from Breasted 1916: 54.

## Conclusion

It has been my intention throughout this study to let the content of Breasted's written work guide the level of contextualization of Egyptology in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. As such, this is not a broadly conceived intellectual history of the discipline's development as a whole, but rather a window into a seminal period in the institutionalization and popularization of Egyptology in America using James Henry Breasted as the central figure. Other profoundly important American Egyptologists – notably George Reisner and Herbert Winlock – have been mentioned only briefly. Yet the focus on Breasted should not be mistaken for an attempt at a biographical work. Details of Breasted's life have been included only so far as they illuminate his academic work. Neither should this study be perceived as a history of the Oriental Institute, or as a history of Breasted's career as an administrator. Other scholars, with longer years of research into Breasted's life, have produced detailed and insightful accounts of his considerable administrative acumen.

The core of this work is a critical analysis of Breasted's historical narratives. The four books that are at the center of this study – *A History of Egypt* (1905), *Ancient Times* (1916/1935), *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (1912), and *The Dawn of Conscience* (1934) – were all intended to be accessible to a popular audience. *The History* was his early demonstration of the interpretive work that he believed could be produced from a “scientific” approach to Egyptology. For Breasted, this meant consulting the original texts whenever possible, including making one's own transcription of monuments, stelae, and papyri. Such an approach demanded not only a

mastery of ancient language, but also a dedication to meticulous epigraphic work.

However, language study was for Breasted a means to an end, as he regularly criticized those scholars – he was particularly vehement about Classicists – who studied language and grammar as an end in itself. Even as a graduate student, he had a vision of Egyptological writing that would be broad in its syntheses and interpretations, while demonstrating a solid basis in what he referred to as scientific, historical fact.

His books were well – and widely – received. H.G. Wells, Sigmund Freud, the Rockefeller family, Theodore Roosevelt, and Lord Allenby are just a few of the famous names who read his popular works, the latter two even incorporating New Kingdom military history into their own strategies in the Middle East. For academics, the two criticisms they most frequently voiced were his tendency to cite primarily his own work – usually his five-volume *Ancient Records of Egypt* – rather than the contributions of others, and the elevation of Egypt to a point of unchallenged supremacy in the history of the ancient Near East. For the latter, he was usually forgiven, as his unquenchable enthusiasm and bias toward Egypt led to engaging, and sometimes transporting, prose.

Despite his infrequent use of footnotes, his writing was engaged with the anthropological and archaeological discourse of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4 the degree to which his thought was informed by evolutionary and diffusionist methods of interpretation, as well as the influence of physical anthropology and racial categorization in his narrative of civilization's rise in the Near East. Alongside the influences from the natural and social sciences, Breasted employed narrative motifs that gave texture to his interpretations. In *A History of Egypt*, the Orient was both a signifier of the exotic as well as a decadent and despotic foil

against which to cast ancient Egypt as a moral state. In *Ancient Times*, the emphasis on humanity's "conquest" of the material world led to the concept of enlightened exploitation, in which industrialism, colonization, and even warfare can be justified if it serves the cause of civilization's progress – provided that those who fit Breasted's definition of "civilized" are the bearers of that progress.

The material advances of humanity, however, are in tension with the themes of *Development of Religion and Thought* and *The Dawn of Conscience*. Here, Breasted is concerned with *moral* progress – the evolution, rather than revelation, of ethics and social idealism. It is in the latter book, the final one of his career before his unexpected death, that we can see a narrative pattern coalescing – a pattern which began in *A History of Egypt*. The source of morality, born out of human experience in the world, is located in the bucolic setting of an agricultural estate. Nature is credited as partially giving rise to the "inner voice" that compels humans to seek an ethical standard, but not only nature alone: the grand estate, replete with hierarchical social order, also contributes to the formation of a moral world. In his later work, Breasted increasingly emphasizes the nuclear family itself as the origin of moral consciousness. Thus is the emergence of morality assigned to the spheres in which Breasted himself grounded his own reality: family, social hierarchy, and landscapes that stir the imagination.

The popular appeal of Breasted's books is a significant factor in this work. Although he published specialized research, such as his monograph on the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus, his books for a non-specialist audience are the explicit focus of this dissertation. As I argued in Chapter 4, broadly conceived and widely read books are not only worthy of critical reflection, they are of essential importance to understanding the



dissemination of historical knowledge into the popular consciousness. In light of the recent challenges to the Eurocentrism that structures the history of Egyptology, it is equally important to critically analyze the historiography of ancient Egypt that was produced during an era of Western colonial domination of the Middle East and Africa.

Arising from this is the question of Breasted's academic legacy: to what degree have his interpretations influenced contemporary understandings of ancient Egypt? It was noted in Chapter 4 that his remarks about race and culture in *Ancient Times* resonated with non-specialists well into the 1980s, producing negative reactions to the language and racial characterizations in his text. It is useful to broaden the scope of the discussion to include the effect of Breasted's geographical characterizations on later perceptions of Africa and Egypt. For Breasted, ancient Egypt was *in* Africa but not *of* Africa; he perceived Egypt's location on the African continent as a physical reality but not a culturally significant element in Egypt's development. In *Ancient Times* he redrew the map, creating a racial geography in which the land bordering the Mediterranean became the Great Northwest Quadrant, and its inhabitants the "Great White Race". In doing so, he detached Egypt from Africa and created a cultural zone in which proximity to the Mediterranean – and by extension, proximity to the later cultures of Greece and Rome – determined whether a group was inside or outside the realm of civilization.

This reworking of geography continued to appear in the much later work of other scholars. In 1987, Graham Connah published *African Civilizations: Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa: An Archaeological Perspective*. His intention was to introduce African archaeology into the discussion of early cities and states, from which it had been largely marginalized, but he also employed a vocabulary that reinforced the

racial and cultural separation of Africa from Egypt. Connah stated that his focus was the cities and states of “*black* Africa. . . . In addition, North Africa and Egypt have long had such diverse connections with the Mediterranean and South-West Asian world, that it seems legitimate to exclude them from this study” (Connah 1987: 21). Connah reproduced not only the geographic distinctions characteristic of Breasted’s work, but the racial distinctions as well. It is not simply proximity to the Mediterranean and the Levant that separates Egypt from its southern neighbors; it is also, by contrast, not a *black* civilization.

In discussing the middle Nile – what Egyptologists refer to as Upper and Lower Nubia – Connah labeled the region a corridor and cul-de-sac. He quoted William Adams’ 1977 book *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*, in which Williams described Nubia as a transition zone between the civilized world and Africa. Here, again, are echoes of Breasted: Africa – meaning that which does not include Egypt – was not within the sphere of civilization, an equation set up over fifty years earlier in *Ancient Times*. Connah followed Adams’ interpretation, claiming that the cultures of Nubia, from Kerma to Meroë, were a “cultural cul-de-sac” – important only because they served as a trade artery between Egypt and the resources it sought to exploit (Connah 1987: 24-25). It is significant to note that in Connah’s revised edition of *African Civilizations*, published in 2001, the chapter on the middle Nile was repackaged: no longer a corridor, the region is now labeled “birth on the Nile: the Nubian achievement” (Connah 2001: 18). An expanded paragraph states that although Nubia was a trade corridor, it was not, as maintained in the previous edition, merely a cul-de-sac, for such a view implies cultural

passivity. Rather, “Nubia belongs to Africa and so do its achievements” (ibid. 19). Egypt and North Africa, however, are still divorced from “tropical” Africa.

The example above demonstrates the tenacity of historical narrative. Concepts that become established in the academic mainstream persist not only in later scholarship but also in the public’s perception of academic agendas. Writing of V. Gordon Childe, Ruth Tringham (1983) noted that his popular, interpretive books were overlooked by academics as outdated and unworthy of serious intellectual reflection. Childe himself, however, cited exactly these books as his most original and useful contributions to the discipline. Breasted, I believe, would have felt the same of his own work. Though he was constantly lamenting the lack of time for his own research, he continued to write popular books long after he no longer had a financial need to do so. In *The Dawn of Conscience*, his earnest exhortations to the younger generation to heed their cultural inheritance –an inheritance of morality and upward progress – gives the impression that for Breasted, the past was very much a force in the present. Regardless of the sincerity of his intentions, the reception of his books by the public, and their wide use as textbooks for generations of students, is reason enough to view them as worthy of critical reflection. Narratives of ancient Egypt continue to ripple throughout our popular and academic culture. In America, to trace them to their source is often to find ourselves at James Henry Breasted’s door.

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