



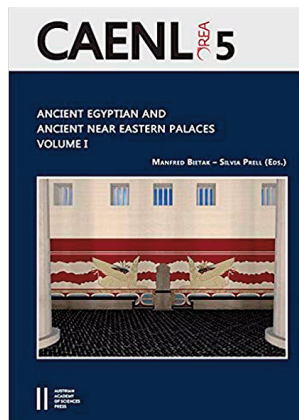
REVIEW

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN AND ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PALACES VOLUME 1

edited by Manfred Bietak and Silvia Prell
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The reviewed volume presents the first of a two-part volume on Egyptian and Near Eastern Palaces, comprising seventeen papers by scholars largely working on material covering the physical, social, political, and economic aspects of palaces in Bronze Age Egypt. The volume is based on recent conferences and sessions on the subject of Egyptian and Near Eastern palaces, as well as the editor's research project "Palaces in Egypt," funded through the Austrian Science Fund (p. 7). The intent of these volumes is to provide a comparative perspective and critical commentary on the identification, categorization, and functions of these buildings in Egypt (pp. 29–32). This builds on Bietak's previous edited volume, *House and Palace in Ancient Egypt*, which was also a collective work on Egyptian palaces that incorporated comparative examples from Bronze Age Crete and Nubia.¹ This new volume feels like an update and expansion of this previous work, presenting papers that provide thematic studies or present new research on many of the sites discussed in *House and Palace*. However, the focus in this volume is exclusively on Egypt, while the second volume is stated to be largely focused on the Near East, with some Egyptian contributions and comparative discussions. There



seems to be an implication that Near East will largely refer to the northern Levant (pp. 31–32), and it remains to be seen if this future volume will incorporate other regions such as Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Nubia, and the Aegean.

The goal of this volume is to provide a starting point in constructing a larger narrative and grammar of Egyptian palatial architecture. This purpose is set up in the three introductory papers, which discuss the concept of "palace" and the state of research on Egyptian palaces. Alexander Tzonis begins with a reflective and comparative discussion of how palaces can be approached and examined by scholars using Roman and early modern historical examples, which I will comment on further below. This is followed by Bietak's introductory paper which gives an overview of the state of research on Egyptian palaces and the aims of the volume and future research. The introductory papers are rounded off by an excellent paper by Eva Lange-Athinodorou which examines how Egyptians viewed the concept of "palace" through a holistic examination of text and architecture.

The rest of the volume presents site and building focused papers (Hierakonpolis, Buto, Elephantine, Dahshur, Dakhla Oasis, Tell Basta, Tell el-Dab'a,

Malqata, Dier el-Ballas, Sai, and Medinet Habu), and some textual studies that are organized by time period, covering the Predynastic to late New Kingdom. This diachronic coverage of the architectural remains of palaces is perhaps the strongest and most useful aspect of the volume, providing a detailed and accessible overview of this material in a single publication. However, it is rather disappointing that some of the papers provide little new information on sites and buildings, such as Peter Lacovara's paper on Dier el-Ballas and Rainer Stadelmann's paper on the ceremonial palace at Medinet Habu. Nevertheless, other papers, including Renée Friedman and Richard Bussman's paper on Hierakonpolis and Ulrich Hartung's paper on Buto, provide key new material that helps to contextualize the less represented palaces of the Predynastic, Early Dynastic, and Old Kingdom into larger discussions on the identification and roles of these buildings across time. It is curious why later periods and sites were not included in the volume, as palaces at Third Intermediate and Late Period sites like Napata and Memphis could provide intriguing and little-studied perspectives and intercultural comparisons for the project. Hopefully such periods will be represented in later volumes and publications from the wider "Palaces in Egypt" project.

The authors in the volume provide valuable perspectives on issues of interpretation and identification of palaces based on the often limited architectural remains or disparate textual sources available. In many of the presented archaeological sites, the authors highlight how the architectural evidence is ephemeral, leading to difficulty in identifying structures' function and roles in society. The diversity and variation of their design and architectural features illustrate that the concept of palace itself is more nuanced than currently understood. This is demonstrated in a number of papers, notably Julia Budka's examination of palaces in Egyptian colonial settlements in Nubia and Eva Lange-Athinodorou's paper on the palace and cemeteries at Tell Basta. These papers all discuss the relationship between royal and court/elite spaces, and how the distinction between these are often hard to pinpoint. These blurred relationships provide key questions that need to be addressed further, moving beyond concepts of mere passive, top-down emulation of the royal. For example, in Budka's paper there are some interesting observations on the

issues of understanding of the occupants and roles of the New Kingdom "governor or mayoral residences" in Nubian temple towns. These buildings appear to be adaptable social reception spaces and residences that could be used by different officials, courtiers, and possibly even royalty (pp. 267–268). In this manner, they do not fit into bounded and static categories of "royal," "court," or "elite" architecture, instead being dynamic spaces that may have been used by different people depending on status and rank. In addition to these difficulties in distinguishing between royal, court, and elite buildings, there are also aspects of regionality in design that should be considered, as Eva Lange-Athinodorou notes (p. 166). Different building techniques, placement of features, and relationships to other structures and spaces, such as cemeteries and tombs, indicate that these palatial buildings are products of localized and regional cultural traditions. In these cases, the differences in architectural design and trajectories might a consequence not of different function and roles for the buildings but, rather, of regional and localized cultural traditions and identities within Egypt itself.

While the volume provides an excellent site-by-site analysis and discussions of disparate textual evidence, it is rather lacking in comparative and holistic papers that critically discuss the concept of "palaces" in Egypt. While Bietak states that in part the volume acts to bring together the archaeological material for future discussion (p. 31), it would have been perhaps more useful to include more of these conceptual discussion papers. The introductory papers present a good starting point to develop this further, but there is a need to bring together the rest of the papers of the volume into a larger discussion for research direction. The site-specific focus of the majority of the papers almost entirely leaves it up to the reader to tease out these larger thematic issues, with little synthesis and commentary on how these buildings may relate, contribute, and address the many research questions and intents that were outlined by Bietak in his introductory paper. Further commentary at the end of the volume on what overarching process, narratives, and roles are apparent from the architectural design of these buildings would have been welcome. The justified hesitancy by many of the authors in classifying some of the discussed structures as palaces highlights that there is still no agreed-upon concept of "palace" at all. This is poignantly highlighted in Stephen

Quirke's paper, in which he argues that the limited evidence available makes the reconciliation of modern and past conceptions of what a "palace" is extremely difficult.

Quirke's paper, however, suggests an engaging way of addressing this difficulty, through using anthropological perspectives and ethnographic and historical analogy (pp. 169–174). He examines the sociological and historical works of Norbert Elias and Jeroen Duindam,² as well as similar approaches by Kate Spence and Christine Readler, that showcase how royal courts and palaces can be holistically studied to address larger questions and conceptions regarding palaces.³ This is echoed by Alexander Tzoni's paper, where he critically examines the concept of "palace" through a number of historical examples ranging from Hadrian's Villa Adrienne at Tibur to Louis XIV's intentions of the Louvre and Versailles. Ultimately Tzoni presents the problem of how analogy can be a means of explaining everything and yet nothing (p. 9, 20). He puts forward the view that historical context is the most important piece of evidence in understanding the agency and intent of such structures that we call palaces. But archaeologists are not often lucky enough to have the detailed evidence from texts to illuminate what such agency and intent is. Instead, as Tzoni and Quirke both point out, analogy is a key and essential interpretative tool, but one that must be critically applied. These two papers bring much needed self-reflection to the volume on the approaches and methodologies which archaeologists use in examining palaces and other forms of architecture. Such critical commentary on the nature of palaces has been extensively debated in Bronze Age Aegean archaeology, which has worked to refine and give nuance to the concept, as well as to provide alternative terms and approaches to these buildings.⁴ Ultimately these issues may be addressed in the future second volume and contextualize this volume as part of the larger project behind the publication output.

From an architectural viewpoint, another broader issue arises from the volume regarding *why* certain architectural features are used as integral characteristics of palaces. Columns, daises, wall paintings, courtyards: all of these are recognized by the authors as "palatial" or "monumental" architectural features, but there is little examination of why these features are included in a building's design beyond cursory discussion of psychological

concepts such as awe and fear that are elucidated largely from textual sources. The reader is left to wonder how archaeologists and Egyptologists define a palace and what types of architectural features identify them. If we are to understand palaces as multifunctional social spaces for the interaction between the king, royal family, the court, foreign courtiers, and those outside the court, how do these architectural features and arrangements manage and incorporate these social and ideological relationships? While the volume under review is certainly very efficient in presenting the architectural material and critically commenting on the difficulty in identifying parts of palaces and correlating them with textual sources, there seems to be an underlining assumption that palaces are identified based on architectural features without critically considering either what those features accomplish in the overall design or the experiential impact of that architecture. Some engagement with phenomenological and embodied architectural theory, such as the work of Juhani Pallasmaa, would help to flesh out the future examination and discussion of the agency of palatial design.⁵ An embodied and phenomenological perspective is already being addressed in studies of palaces in the Near Eastern and Aegean world, making this an opportune moment for scholars to reflect on how these theoretical approaches can contribute towards a reinvigoration of the study of Egyptian palaces.⁶

Ultimately these critiques do not detract from the merits of the volume, which provides a detailed overview of the current archaeological evidence on palaces in Egypt while also setting some foundation for future discussions and research. It will be very interesting to see how the second volume, and any additional future volumes, will work to build on this groundwork to stimulate further discussion and research on Egyptian palaces.

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NOTES

- ¹ See Bietak 1996.
- ² Elias 1969; Duindam 2003, 2011.
- ³ See Spence 2007 and Readler 2007.
- ⁴ Day and Relaki 2002; Schoep 2002.
- ⁵ Pallasmaa 2005.
- ⁶ See McMahon 2013, Neuman 2018, and Palyvou 2018 for examples of such approaches.