

## BOOK REVIEWS

BAREŠ, Ladislav, VESELÝ, Rudolf, GOMBÁR, Eduard. *Dějiny Egypta*. [History of Egypt]. Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2009. 821 p. ISBN 978-80-7106-971-3. In Czech.

The contemporary importance of Egypt is reflected in a large and constantly increasing body of publications, dealing with its history, politics and ideologies as well as social and economic development. The „Lidové noviny” Publishing House has now included in its long-running successful editorial programme entitled “Histories of Nations” the publishing of a historical work examining the whole history of Egypt. It has become the rule that works which were written by leading home specialists – unlike translations of books from abroad – are closer to the inkling and requirements of both Czech and Slovak readers. As the authors put it, Egypt belongs to those countries in which the living axis was made of rivers, like other civilizations (China, India and Mesopotamia) and has one of the longest continuous histories in the world which reaches to the very threshold of human civilization.

Egypt provided one of the earliest sites of civilized society on earth. Throughout its long history Egypt’s culture has been deeply influenced by topographical peculiarities and geographical location. The rainfall of the country is sparse and most of the territory is desert. Thus, Egypt’s capacity to support an agricultural population depends on the valley of the Nile and some oases in its western desert. The natural bounty of Egypt – the annual floodwater from the Nile – has been exploited for millennia, stored in specially prepared basins and gradually released over the subsequent months. Because of the constant renewal of fertility by the silt brought down by the flood it has always been possible to harvest two crops a year. On the banks of the Nile handwriting as hieroglyphic writing came into being and represented a visual record of the spoken word.

The racial origins of the first Egyptian people are obscure, but it is obvious to any visitor that the type made familiar by the paintings and sculptures of Ancient Egypt still persists side by side with the multitude of others left by the numerous conquests and immigrations which the country has suffered since the Assyrian conquest in the seventh century BC. That conquest left little trace, but the Greeks who came first as mercenaries and merchants and later with Alexander the Great as conquerors in the fourth century BC brought profound changes. The Romans succeeded the Greeks as the rulers of the eastern Mediterranean. When the Roman Empire was finally divided in the fourth

century AD, Egypt naturally remained in the eastern half and she had already become Christian. In the seventh century AD Egypt became part of the domain of Islam and from then on ceased to share in the political and cultural evolution of Europe.

The authors of this monumental historical work are three outstanding Czech orientologists. First is an Egyptologist, Professor Ladislav Bareš, director of the Institute of Egyptology at Charles University in Prague; the second is an Arabist, Professor Rudolf Veselý from the Institute of Near East and Africa; and the third is Professor Eduard Gombár, the current director of the Institute of Near East and Africa at Charles University in Prague. Professor Bareš has written the first part of the book entitled "The Ancient History of Egypt". This is the period beginning with earliest human activities in the Nile valley. The author gives a vivid picture of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms and ends his part with a description of the situation during the Greek and Roman supremacy. It is clear that the greatest problem for Professor Bareš was to cram so much into a limited space.

The second part of the book is entitled "Egypt in the Middle Ages" and begins with the emergence of Islam and the conquest of Egypt by Muslim Arabs. Professor Veselý describes the historical events in Egypt during the age of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates and during the Shī'ite Fā'imide Caliphate, when Egypt became the base for a heretical anti-caliphate which lasted for two hundred years. For a time this made Cairo the main centre of Islamic power. He continues his narrative of Egypt through the age of the crusades and explains how the orthodoxy of Islam was restored when Egypt was conquered by Šalā'haddīn al-Ayyūbī. A century later the Baghdad caliphate had been destroyed by the Mongols and Cairo was ruled by the freedmen officers of the slave regiments of the Ayyūbid armies, the Mamlūks. It was these Mamlūks who halted the Mongol armies in Syria and destroyed the last strongholds of the Crusaders. Professor Veselý also concentrates on the history of the Mamlūk Sultanate in Egypt and after its defeat in 1517 with Egypt as a part of the Ottoman Empire. During the 16th to 18th centuries we are witnessing several attempts of the Mamlūk elite to seize power once again in Egypt from the Ottomans.

Professor Gombár is the author of the third and fourth parts of the book. The third part called "Modern Egypt" begins with the military campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt in 1798 and its consequences. Afterwards the author describes Egypt during the reign of the Viceroy Muḥammad 'Alī and his successors. The whole narrative is interwoven with explaining the problems of the so-called "Eastern Question" from its beginning at the end of the eighteenth century until its end as a result of the peace arrangements after the Second World War. The author objectively evaluates the events and at the same time sharply discloses the overt and covert interests of the great powers, which are by their own historians on numerous occasions either omitted or embellished. The author also examines the situation after the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, when the country remained formally a part of the Ottoman Empire, going through the period of the British protectorate (1914 – 1922). The author continues his scholarly account of the political, economic, social and cultural development of Egypt during its formal independence under firm British control supported by the presence of thousands of British troops.

The fourth and last part of the book written by Professor Gombár is similarly entitled "Contemporary Egypt" and is dedicated to the historical developments from the Egyptian revolution of the Free Officers in 1952 to the end of the twentieth century. Most attention is paid to that period of Egyptian history when the country was ruled by Jamāl ʿAbdannāṣir (1954 – 1970). Then follows the decade of President Anwar as-Sādāt (1971 – 1981), during which he radically changed the revolutionary course of Egypt. His political line was inconsistent and the fact that at the beginning of his rule he exploited the Muslim Brotherhood in his political struggle with leftist forces released the long oppressed forces of political Islam which finally bloodily liquidated him. Egypt during the era of President Ḥusnī Mubārak once and for all lost the position of a regional Arab power, which it had been in the fifties and sixties. An interesting completion of this part is the chapter named "Czech-Egyptian Relations". In his presentation Professor Gombár links together the problems of internal development (e.g. modernization, secularization, nationalism and political Islam) in periods under research with questions of foreign policy which influenced the situation (the policy of European powers and later the USA and USSR superpowers) and provides an essential background for the formation of judgments about contemporary Egypt's problems and prospects.

The authors had mobilized their deep knowledge in the field and the book will appeal to anyone interested in the history of Egypt. It will undoubtedly be of help to students and to non-specialists alike. Although the bibliography is limited to a list of selected works, it shows a creative and wide-ranging use of primary and secondary sources and can serve both historians and those interested in history as a sufficient guide. Keeping in mind that a synthetic work of this type cannot answer every question it suggests, it gives a sound basis for further reading. The book is undoubtedly the result of many years of successful symbiosis of the all three authors' teaching and research work at the university. This book is vital reading for anyone interested in the subject it addresses, particularly those who have a good command of Czech. It is written with imagination, understanding, profound insights, and scholarly detachment.

Despite its large size the book is extremely readable and in fact one which is often hard to put down. It is so well written, so beautifully produced, and so coherent in its presentation of what in other hands might be a tedious subject. In sum, this important and challenging book will be an excellent stimulus for those interested in the history of Egypt. The reader finishes this substantial book with a firm grasp of the main tendencies of Egypt's historical development. The authors have put together a fascinating account of continuity and change and they have succeeded on every score.

*Karol Sorby*