

Review:

Bercken, Ben van den, ed. *Alternative Egyptology. Critical Essays on the Relation between Academic and Alternative Interpretations of Ancient Egypt*. Leiden: Sidestone. Hardback €95, paperback €35, PDF €15, online free (DOI: [10.59641/rho5a4ij](https://doi.org/10.59641/rho5a4ij))

Florian Ebeling

Research into the reception of Ancient Egypt is confronted with the problem that the term “reception” is not clearly defined and is used in many ways.¹ In addition, there are numerous terms used synonymously or as subcategories; one such term can be found in the title of the reviewed book. It is a collection of papers from a conference that took place in 2021 at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam. Such conference proceedings have played an important role in research into the reception of Ancient Egypt: In 1997, Elisabeth Staehelin and Bertrand Jaeger published the papers from a conference in honour of Erik Hornung in 1993 under the title *Ägypten-Bilder (Images of Egypt)*, and some of these texts are among the most important inspirations for subsequent research.² The eight-volume *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* also dates back to a conference held in London in 2000.³ With 95 essays, they offer an impressive summary of the research and at the same time demonstrate that these numerous individual studies were hardly connected with each other. The question of the diachronic connection is explored in the volume *Beyond Egyptomania*, edited by Miguel John Versleuys, which stems from a conference in Leiden in 2016.⁴ Conference proceedings can therefore lead to outstanding research results.⁵

In the introduction of *Alternative Egyptology*, the editor explains the key concept and the approach with reference to an essay of the same title by Lynn

¹ The articles in this journal testify to the diversity of interpretations of the concept of reception; see in particular the essays that dealt with the connection between after-life/Nachleben and mnemohistory in the context of a conference at the Warburg Institute in London (<http://doi.org/10.11588/aegyp.2019.4>) and a conference at the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel (<http://doi.org/10.11588/aegyp.2020.5>).

² Staehelin and Jaeger, *Ägypten-Bilder*.

³ *Encounters with Ancient Egypt*, eight volumes.

⁴ Versleuys, *Beyond Egyptomania*.

⁵ None of these books, which are so important for the research into the reception of Ancient Egypt, are cited in the anthology. Only one essay from one volume of the *Encounters* is cited, without any reference to the publication context.

Picknett and Clive Price in one of the *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* volumes;⁶ two authors who have mainly published fringe/alternative history-books. Although they do not refer to academic literature on the social relevance or history of ideas in esotericism, Picknett and Price draw attention to an interesting phenomenon: in the 1990s, a movement that understood itself as an alternative to academic Egyptology became established for the first time at an institutional level (i.e. with its own conferences, journals and discourses). And these publications reached a significantly larger audience than “mainstream Egyptology”, which could no longer ignore the alternative movement. The two authors believe that an intense relationship has developed between alternative and established Egyptology. As examples, they mention the Egyptologists Zahi Hawass, who served as an advisor for the Egyptian Rosicrucians, and Mark Lehner, who was a follower of the esotericist Hugh Lynn Cayce in his younger years. The reviewer considers this to be an insufficient empirical basis, especially since he, as a student of Egyptology in Heidelberg and Leiden in the 1990s, noticed a sharp distinction between representatives of the academic discipline and esotericism rather than an attempt for a dialogue.⁷

The essay by Picknett and Price seems to be the inspiration for the term “alternative Egyptology”, which the editor himself does not explain explicitly, but only hints at. Instead, he juxtaposes it with the term “Egyptosophy”, which Erik Hornung developed in the 1990s.⁸ In 1997, Hornung wanted “to use Egyptosophy [...] to describe everything that deals with Egyptian wisdom or what is considered to be such”.⁹ Hornung largely identifies this with the history of Hermeticism and, in 1999, expands it in *Das esoterische Ägypten* to include esoteric currents in a broader sense.¹⁰ He also emphasises the different cognitive interests of Egyptology and Egyptosophy and points out that Egyptosophy can only be understood as a long history: “[In Morenz’s studies on the reception of ancient Egypt, the], esoteric undercurrent is therefore only occasionally to be glimpsed [...]. Here, we shall follow its course down through the last two millennia[...]”.¹¹ For Hornung, Egyptosophy is esotericism, but the study of the phenomenon is by no means esoteric: “It is possible to make an academic study of esoteric matters, which is

6 Picknett and Clive, “Alternative Egyptology”.

7 See Erik Hornung’s reflections from the 1990s, discussed below. He sympathizes with the phenomenon but strictly distinguishes it from academic Egyptology.

8 The 1993 lecture was published 1997 in Staehelin and Jaeger, *Ägypten-Bilder*.

9 “Mit Ägyptosophie [...] alles benennen, was sich mit ägyptischer Weisheit beschäftigt oder mit dem, was dafür gehalten wird.” (Staehelin and Jaeger, *Ägypten-Bilder*, 333).

10 Hornung, *Das Esoterische Ägypten*, engl. *The secret lore of Egypt*.

11 Hornung, *The secret lore of Egypt*, 2.

what I intend to do here. It is also possible for adherents of esoteric doctrines to adduce knowledge from the academic discipline of Egyptology with profit and incorporate it into their systems. But one must at all costs avoid hopelessly mixing the two areas of interest, as unfortunately continues to happen — especially when esoteric doctrines are covered with some academic veneer and thus purportedly ‘proven’.¹² According to Hornung, however, Egyptosophy is only one part of the reception of Egypt, and he emphasises that it is a matter of meaning-making and not the question of truth: “We shall thus be concerned not with the truth of, for example, theosophical or astrological doctrines but only with their relationship to Egypt and to other, related movements.”

The third and final contribution that the editor draws on to explain his concept is a book by Nicky Nielsen from 2020 entitled *Egyptomaniacs*. It is a typical example of books published under the label of “Egyptomania”: a brief and storyful overview of the history of reception from Herodotus to the mummy enthusiasm of the 19th century up to Egypt in pop culture. There is no definition of terms, no discussion of the interest in knowledge, no mention of Versluys, Assmann, Hornung or the eight-volume *Encounters*. Why does van den Bercken refer to this book by Nielsen and ignores almost all the sound research that is available? The brief introduction leaves vague hints: “alternative Egyptology” is an understanding of Egypt that deviates from scientific Egyptology and developed particularly in the 1990s; the aim of the conference and an urgent task for the future is to bring traditional and alternative Egyptology back into dialogue with each other.

Many questions remain unasked: Should not the concept of science and the truth practices of “mainstream Egyptology” be distinguished, at least in outline, from those of “alternative Egyptology”?¹³ Why is no question raised about the origins of this thinking? And why has the editor not dealt with the many publications that deal with the reception of Egypt or the history of hermeneutics of esotericism?¹⁴ However, the authors of the following essays are not responsible for this introduction.

¹² Hornung, *The secret lore of Egypt*, 3

¹³ Whereby the concept of truth and the scientific practices of the natural sciences and cultural studies would also have to be distinguished.

¹⁴ An epilogue (181–182) reveals that Ben van den Bercken slipped into the role of co-organiser of the conference and editor of this volume through his predecessor as curator of the Egyptian collection at the University Museum Amsterdam. His predecessor, Willem van Haarlem, understands alternative and scientific Egyptology as “two branches on the same tree that have grown more and more apart” and argues that “mainstream Egyptology should not ignore the less extreme ‘alternative’ factions, but address them seriously and,

Caroline Tully (17–27) reports on the significance of Egypt in the “Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn”, focusing on some members of this “order” from the late 19th century. Unfortunately, she does not discuss the problematic situation of sources: the reviewer is hardly aware of any solid academic literature on this topic. Nor does the reader learn anything about the Order’s background in the history of Hermeticism. Tully sees power and claims to legitimacy as the reasons for referring to Egypt. In the history of the Golden Dawn, however, the search for hidden or higher wisdom played an important role, and Egypt was considered its home. This omission of the history of reception of Ancient Egypt has consequences for its interpretation: Tully emphasises that it was problematic to establish an initiation system based on the Egyptian model, as there were no Egyptian mysteries. This may be true when it comes to the question of whether there were mysteries in Ancient Egypt in the form later described, for example, by Apuleius.¹⁵ But it is completely wrong when it comes to the history of reception. In this history, the mysteries and initiations of the Egyptians played a decisive role, from Middle Platonism to alchemy and Paracelsianism in the early modern period to the Rosicrucians and Freemasons, who formed an important basis of the Hermetic Order.¹⁶

The discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922 was a sensation for Egyptology, which was professionally marketed in the media and accompanied by numerous esoteric speculations: in particular, the “curse of the pharaohs” and an enthusiasm for mummies. Jasmine Day (29–41) has a lot of interesting and worthwhile things to say on this subject; however, her article is subtitled “Egyptology, Egyptosophy, and the ‘Truth’ about Ancient Egypt”. And this is precisely where it becomes difficult: she believes that pseudoscience is characterised by the fact that those involved negotiate the truth, while scientific Egyptology produces fixed truths (“‘Truth’ is an object to be constructed via negotiation in today’s pseudoscientific communities, in contrast to scientific understandings of it as fixed and evidence-based.”) However, such a concept of truth has long been considered outdated in philosophy, scientific theory and cultural studies. Truth is always discursive, situational and culturally mediated. It is thereby not arbitrary, and there are numerous statements that can be falsified. The truth practices of what Day calls

if necessary, refute them (or not) with clear arguments—hopefully to the benefit of both sides”. But who decides what is extreme, what are the criteria and on what basis should such a discussion take place?

15 Even this is controversial, see: Assmann and Bommas, *Ägyptische Mysterien?*

16 See: Ebeling, *Secret History* and Assmann and Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien*.

pseudosciences undoubtedly differ from those of academic Egyptology, but not insofar as Egyptologists have fixed truths at their disposal. It is regrettable that this question, which concerns a core problem of “alternative Egyptology”, was not addressed in the foreword or discussed in a comprehensible manner among the conference members.

Maiken Mosleth King (42–52), like Tully before, focuses on Aleister Crowley and his reference to Ancient Egypt. Crowley and the religion he founded, Thelema, are indeed one of the most interesting examples of an intense and culturally influential encounter with Ancient Egypt outside of academia. Thelema is still practised today, particularly in the “Ordo Templi Orientis”. However, the reviewer finds that this essay also lacks a critical examination of the sources. Crowley was a master of self-promotion, and apart from many hagiographies, there are very few academically sound publications about Crowley and Ancient Egypt.¹⁷

Daniel M. Potter (54–67) reports on a figure who straddled the boundary between esotericism and academic science: Charles Piazzi Smyth (1819–1900). He made numerous contributions to natural science, receiving awards and honours, while at the same time seeking esoteric wisdom in the pyramids. Here, too, it would have been worthwhile to ask about the historical background of the ideas: the notion that the pyramids were “biblical time capsules”, which was important to Smyth, can also be found in alchemo-paracelsism and among the Freemasons, among others. However, Potter’s essay is a solid analysis in which he describes the intellectual profile of a fascinating border crosser. Finally, he asks why, for example, Flinders Petrie enjoys an excellent reputation in Egyptology, even though, as Potter points out, he was a racist and a supporter of the pseudoscientific eugenics, while Smyth has found no recognition. As important as this question is, because it draws attention to power structures in academic disciplines, in this case it may also have to do with the fact that Petrie made important contributions to Egyptology that are still recognised today, while Smyth’s achievements lay more outside the field of Egyptology.

¹⁷ At the very end of her essay, the author mentions that Crowley was part of the Hermetic tradition. But why were the influences on Crowley not examined in more detail? There is a long tradition in which Hermeticism, magic, alchemy and revelatory faith were linked to Ancient Egypt; a tradition in which Crowley also stands and which could make the fascination with Egypt more understandable.

Willem van Haarlem (68–74) reports on the theory that the pyramids of Giza are aligned with the constellation of Orion. The thesis that the pyramids were built according to a 10,000-year-old plan has its precursors in the 1960s but was popularised by Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert in the 1990s. The article offers a purely descriptive account rather than a critical analysis and does not refer to any academic literature on esoteric research, which is all the more incomprehensible given that one of the most important institutes for research into esoteric traditions belongs to the University of Amsterdam, where the conference was held.¹⁸

Andrea Sinclair (76–94) discusses how the use of psychoactive substances in Ancient Egypt was interpreted in spiritual, neo-pagan and pseudoscientific contexts. The patterns of interpretation do not correspond to modern scientific standards, even though the circles discussed by Sinclair have made an effort to draw on academic literature or to give their research the appeal of scientific foundations. However, they do so selectively and also draw on outdated literature. In addition, most of the active substances discussed in this context have only been reliably detectable in Egypt since Greco-Roman times.

Arnaud Quertinmont (96–105) examines the significance of Egypt in comics and highlights the many spheres of influence: from the literary works of Howard Philip Lovecraft (1890–1937) and alleged UFO sightings to racist theories about white gods and ancient astronauts. He places the comic *Batman and the Book of the Dead* at the centre of his highly readable essay. At the end of his text, Quertinmont asks whether the pseudo- or para-scientific motifs used in the comics are understood as pure entertainment or whether they “help the propagation of alternative theories to Egyptology and has a real impact on society and science?” He reports on this from his experience in museum practice. In 2016, the Musée Royal de Mariemont organised a small exhibition entitled “De Stargate aux Comics. Les Dieux égyptiens dans la culture geek (1975–2015)” which also featured Egypt in parascience and conspiracy theories. Quertinmont reports that many visitors expressed desire for mysteries that should not be solved. All visitors who were interviewed after visiting the exhibition stated that they deemed pre-astronautics (i.e., the theory that extraterrestrial civilizations existed in ancient times,

¹⁸ The Centre for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (HHP) is part of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam: <http://www.amsterdamhermetica.nl/esotericism-in-the-academy/esotericism-in-amsterdam/>. For an analytical approach to this topic, see: Krüger, “The Stargate Simulacrum”.

colonized Earth, and were directly or indirectly responsible for the early advanced civilizations, Egypt, and the construction of the pyramids) as entertainment only and not as science. At the same time, however, some visitors expressed their satisfaction that pre-astronautics was finally being honoured in a museum. This is an interesting observation, and it would be nice if it was followed up with proper empirical social research. Quertinmont believes that pre-astronautics merely serve as an artistic and aesthetic inspiration. But can the associations with Egypt's past really be clearly separated into fact and fiction? Was not the history of reception of Ancient Egypt rich in texts that were written for entertainment but read as nonfiction (such as Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* or Terrasson's *Sethos*)? How do ideas that are known to have no scientific basis, but are nevertheless very appealing, gain acceptance? Did these ideas shape the image of Ancient Egypt outside of classical academia, even if they were considered fiction, and is it even possible to distinguish so easily between fact and fiction?¹⁹

Eleanor Dobson (106–115) reports on some of the earliest science fiction novels in which the Egyptians appear as space travellers. Egypt stands for the most ancient past as well as for a utopian (sometimes dystopian) civilisation and technological innovation. The reviewer learned remarkable background information on the theories of the correspondence between Egyptian pyramids and constellations: to mention just one, one of the first creators of a map of Mars thought the Pyramid of Cheops was an observatory. Dobson explains and presents an illustration from an 1898 novel showing the Sphinx at Giza being built by Martians. However, these are not just amusing anecdotes; as Dobson makes clear, they are largely based on the racist and imperialist ideas of the time.

Jean-Pierre Pätznick (116–131) presents the case of Heinrich Schliemann's self-proclaimed grandson, who was a forger of historical documents: Paul Schliemann. What is known about him is mainly self-promotion. As Pätznick shows, his theories on archaeology and Egyptology are not the result of scientific based work, but compilations and forgeries. He was a soldier of fortune and a fraudster who wanted to be perceived as a genuine Egyptologist rather than an “alternative Egyptologist”.

¹⁹ Of the numerous discussions surrounding the problematic distinction between fact and fiction, I would like to refer specifically to White, *Tropics of Discourse*.

Tian Tian (132–144) describes an alternative form of Egyptology in China: China and Egypt are two sides of the same coin, a thesis that has found enormous resonance in Chinese social media in the 21st century and dates back to the 19th century.²⁰ Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs were understood to be a Chinese invention, and a translation of the hieroglyphs based on Chinese was considered superior to that of the Western world. By declaring Chinese culture to be the origin of Egyptian culture, it is also claimed to be the cultural origin of Europe and China is asserting cultural hegemony. Since China suffered under Western colonialism for a long time and Egyptology came to China via colonialism, this “alternative Egyptology” can be understood as a form of postcolonial self-assertion. As Tian Tian points out, the boundaries between “alternative Egyptology” and established Western-influenced Egyptology are sometimes blurred in China. For example, professors at renowned Chinese universities have put forward the thesis that the pyramids were only built in concrete in the 20th century.

Research on Freemasonry in South America is rare. It is therefore even more gratifying that Thomas Henrique de Toledo Stella (146–155) reports on a Masonic lodge in Brazil, in whose lodge house Egyptian-style decorations were recently uncovered. The mural painting probably dates from 1874 and was based on Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs* from 1841. Unfortunately, however, it remains a single case study; it would have been useful to explore the long and rich relationship between Freemasonry and Egypt in more detail to understand why these Freemasons referred to Egypt.

Simon Magus (156–165) would like to understand the work of Henry Rider Haggard (1856–1925) as the result of “imperial occultism”, with which he describes a syncretism of esoteric thinking that was the result of British colonialism.²¹ For Magus the search for a hidden god is at the heart of Haggard's writings. For Haggard's conception of Ancient Egypt, he points to the Christian-influenced interpretation of Ancient Egyptian culture by Wallis Budge (1857–1934), who was a friend of Haggard's.

Fortunately, the author begins by referring to the basic concepts of the reception of Ancient Egypt, mentioning Jan Assmann's thesis that the present is

²⁰ Previously, among others, in Athanasius Kircher in the mid-17th century, Matteo Ricci at the beginning of the 17th century and much earlier in Arabic alchemical literature, eg. Ibn Arfa' Ra's. For the latter see: [van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*](#).

²¹ The author has dealt with the subject in much greater detail in a book: [Magus, *Rider Haggard*](#).

often haunted by the past rather than taking possession of it, and sees Assmann's mnemohistory as "in line" with Hornung's concept of Egyptosophy. Hornung, however, follows a content-specific line, that of Egyptian wisdom and Hermeticism in particular, while Assmann sought a method for researching cultural memory as a whole.

Magus did not follow, in this essay, the historical development of Hermeticism or the ideas of the Egyptian mysteries. Here he would have found abundant material for his search for the hidden god, for the idea of an Egyptian primordial monotheism that corresponded in essence to Christianity and, in "Prisca Theologia", a reference to numerous non-European traditions. It is true that these were largely Western projections and appropriations, but does this not apply equally to the intellectual legacy of colonialism?

In his paper, Huub Pragt (166–179) attempts to identify the places mentioned in the biblical account of *the Exodus*. However, there is no evidence or strong indication that this Exodus took place; it is probably a myth that serves as a founding narrative for the Jewish people, but not a historical account of actual events. What is to be gained from identifying such places? What does the author hope to achieve with his essay? This article does not provide an analysis or explanation of his interest in this subject. Jan Assmann's fundamental studies on the concept of Egypt in *Exodus* and the numerous other investigations into the biblical image of Egypt are not mentioned.²² Is the author really searching for the historical truth of the Exodus? The reviewer is left with the impression that this essay was included in this anthology as an example of alternative Egyptology.

This anthology offers quite a lot: some insightful essays alongside others that seem rather superficial and do not refer to current research literature. Some papers walk a dangerously fine line between academic scholarly practices and practiced esotericism. It is not clear why all these papers are grouped under the heading of "alternative Egyptology." Ultimately, this book seems like a missed opportunity. Without a methodological foundation and without any attempt to connect the contributions with each other, this conference volume remains fragmented. If the editor had tried to link the contributions to existing research on the reception of Ancient Egypt or esotericism, much would have been gained.

²² Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*; Kessler, "The Threefold Image of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible", discussed in more detail: Kessler, *Ägyptenbilder*.

Bibliography

- Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* Assmann, Jan. *Moses the Egyptian; the memory of Egypt in western monotheism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Assmann and Bommas, *Ägyptische Mysterien?* Assmann, Jan and Martin Bommas, eds. *Ägyptische Mysterien?* München: Fink, 2002.
- Assmann and Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien* Assmann, Jan and Florian Ebeling. *Ägyptische Mysterien, Reisen in die Unterwelt in Aufklärung und Romantik*. München: C.H. Beck, 2011.
- Ebeling, *Secret History* Ebeling, Florian. *The secret history of Hermes Trismegistus: hermeticism from ancient to modern times*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007.
- Hornung, *Das Esoterische Ägypten* Hornung, Erik. *Das Esoterische Ägypten. Das geheime Wissen der Ägypter und sein Einfluß auf das Abendland*. München: Beck, 1999.
- Hornung, *The secret lore of Egypt* Hornung, Erik. *The secret lore of Egypt: its impact on the West*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001.
- Jaeger and Staehelin, *Ägypten-Bilder* Jaeger, Bertrand and Elisabeth Staehelin, eds. *Ägypten-Bilder*. Freiburg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997.
- Kessler, *Ägyptenbilder* Kessler, Rainer. *Die Ägyptenbilder der Hebräischen Bibel. Ein Beitrag zur neueren Monotheismusdebatte*. Stuttgart: KBW, 2002.
- Kessler, "The Threefold Image of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible" Kessler, Rainer. "The Threefold Image of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible" *Scriptura* 90 (2005): 878-884.
- Krüger, "The Stargate Simulacrum" Krüger, Frederic. "The Stargate Simulacrum: Ancient Egypt, Ancient Aliens, and Postmodern Dynamics of Occulture" in *Aegyptiaca* 1 (2017): 47-74. <http://doi.org/10.11588/aegyp.2017.1.40164>.
- Magus, *Rider Haggard* Magus, Simon. *Rider Haggard and the Imperial Occult. Hermetic Discourse and Romantic Contiguity*. Leiden, Brill: 2022; <http://katalog.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/titel/68921690>.
- Picknett and Prince, "Alternative Egyptology" Picknett, Lynn and Clive Prince, "Alternative Egyptology" in *Consuming Ancient Egypt*, edited by Sally MacDonald and Michael Rice. London: UCL Press, 2003, 175-193. *Encounters with Ancient Egypt*, edited by Peter Ucko. London: UCL Press, 2003.
- Ucko, *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* Ucko, Peter, ed. *Encounters with Ancient Egypt*. Eight volumes. London: UCL Press, 2003.
- Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes* Van Bladel, Kevin. *The Arabic Hermes: from pagan sage to prophet of science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Versluys, *Beyond Egyptomania*. Versluys, Miguel John, ed. *Beyond Egyptomania. Objects, Style and Agency*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- White, *Tropics of Discourse*. White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.