BOOK REVIEWS

ASTRONOMY IN EGYPT


This work completes the publication of a major series begun in 1960 with The early decans and continued in 1964 with The Ramesside star clocks. Decans, planets, constellations and zodiacs is an elephantine production by any standard. The tall 2½-kilogram volume of text is matched by one containing 80 plates, including three in colour and nine that fold out. The text lists chronologically 81 monuments, from “Heny (?)” around 2000 B.C. to Senpeteiris in the Roman period after 30 B.C. Without a blush the authors record that “It was our goal to reach completeness”. Since their catalogue of monuments contains such items as “Great block from the destroyed temple of Triphis and Pan at Akhmim, now itself buried or destroyed” and “Marble plaque, seen by Daressy before 1901 in a dealer’s shop in Cairo, present location unknown”, we must be quite confident that the authors closely approach their goal.

During the last year I had an opportunity to examine and photograph many of the astronomical tomb ceilings in Egypt, including that of Senmut, which has the oldest representation of the northern constellations. I also kept out a sharp eye for stellar figures on artifacts in museums, always hoping to find something overlooked by the authors. One of the most magnificent astronomical scenes is inside the lid of the outer sarcophagus of Psusennes; although it rests unlabelled in the main hall of the Egyptianological Museum in Cairo, Neugebauer and Parker include it. No doubt someone will eventually find a monument not included, but it will not be easy.

The catalogue of monuments that makes up the first chapter of text presents an impressive display of scholarship even beyond the almost incredible detective work that the authors must have done to locate their source material. It ranges from the use of electronically-computed planetary positions for dating the horoscope of Heter to the range of the Isis motif on Roman coinage. Chapter 2 presents more than 50 lists of decans, divided into five principal families. The planets, the constellations, and the zodiac are presented in three successive short chapters, and the volume concludes with analyses of eight miscellaneous texts, all dating from Roman times.

In some respects the most interesting part of the book is the 20 pages devoted to the Egyptian constellations—Lion, Hippo, Croc, and others. Alas, the wealth of pictorial material shows quite clearly that Egyptians frequently placed the figures according to aesthetic demands and thus it is extraordinarily difficult to map the sky as they saw it into our own stellar patterns. Neugebauer and Parker identify Mes with the Big Dipper, Osiris with Orion, and Sothis with Sirius; beyond this they do not speculate. Unsatisfactory as it may be to leave the Great Hippopotamus unidentified, at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that the evidence is all before us in case anyone else is bold enough to try to piece together the confusing Egyptian celestial pantheon.

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