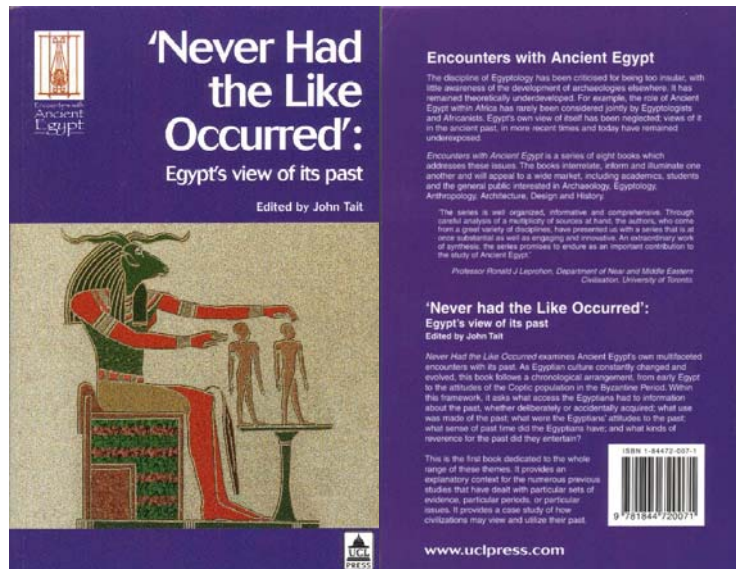


**Tait, J. Ed. 2003. 'Never had the like occurred': Egypt's view of its past. – London, UCL Press
(Encounters with ancient Egypt)**

Book review by S.M. van Roode



'Never had the like occurred' is a phrase often encountered in ancient Egyptian texts. But is it just a standard expression? To what extent did the ancient Egyptians have knowledge about their past and what view did they have of it? These and other questions are addressed in the contributions in this volume of the series 'Encounters with ancient Egypt'.

Usually, the topic is dealt with in a few lines. The Egyptians were a meticulously organised people, they kept records in temples and hence had written knowledge concerning the past. How much more complex the matter actually is, is shown by the variety of angles from which it is approached in the various chapters.

In general, all over the world the 'good old days' are remembered for their higher standards of values, wisdom, and cultural achievements. This was not different in ancient Egypt. The book is chronologically arranged, addressing the wooden reliefs of Hesyt-Ra as examples of already deliberate archaizing to reflect on better times gone by.

The Middle Kingdom is of course famous for its reputation as the Golden Era of Egyptian civilisation. The language, Middle Egyptian, was the classical language and script in which many texts, from instructional texts to hymns, have been written. Even the names of kings from this period were used in later times to lend authenticity. In the book two chapters are dedicated to this period, that seems to have had particular interest for the Egyptians.

In the New Kingdom, we find many references to the past as bygone era, and adhortations to enjoy life as it is, since it is apparent from ruins and forgotten names that nothing lasts forever. In this period, we also find special attention for the craft of the scribe, due to his ability to record and keep events for the past.

Truly copying the Middle Kingdom is done in the Late Period. We find many stelae and inscriptions in Middle Kingdom-style, only distinctable from real Middle Kingdom-material in small details. Sometimes even names and dates are faithfully copied. The book provides many insights in the underlying reasons for this attention for the past, ranging from propagandist activities to fine arts.

A particularly charming chapter is the one on heirlooms in ancient Egypt. Instead of focusing on general developments in style or on well-known texts, it brings the view of the past by the common Egyptians very close. Unfortunately, as little is known about domestic sites in comparison to tombs and monuments, it is very difficult to draw any firm conclusions on the subject. The chapter shows that on this micro-level, much research still needs to be done.

I could go on and discuss every single chapter of this remarkable book. But instead I would recommend you read it yourself. The chapters are well-written, lavishly illustrated and provide detailed analyses of different cases in which Egyptians used their past. The wide variety of angles leaves one with new insights on the large, multifaceted phenomenon that is the past and the many ways in which the Egyptians dealt with it.

Tait, J. Ed. 2003. 'Never had the like occurred': Egypt's view of its past. – London, UCL Press (Encounters with ancient Egypt). 260 pp, ISBN1-84472-007-1. Price £ 25.00 (paperback).