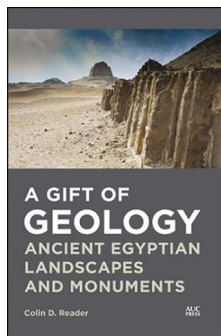




Book Reviews

COLIN D. READER. 2023. *A gift of geology: ancient Egyptian landscapes and monuments*. Cairo & New York: American University in Cairo Press; 978-1-64903-218-8 paperback £24.95.



In this engaging book, Colin Reader leads us briskly through more than 560 million years of geological time, revealing how the topography of Egypt developed and how it provided the raw materials for the ancient Egyptian civilisation. As a chronological narrative of the geological development of Egypt, the book is accessible to the lay reader because it synthesises scholarly books and journal articles in an easily digestible way. Excellent signposting and cross-referencing also mean that, for the ‘traveller’, any chapter can be a starting point depending upon where in Egypt your journey takes you. The author’s long experience of communicating geology to archaeologists, both lay and professional, means that the text includes clear explanations without unnecessary technical terms. It maintains its readability by omitting scholarly apparatus but there are pointers to further reading, which are useful to those who wish to investigate further.

Reader starts with an introduction to the Egyptian landscape, both as we see it today and as it was seen in Antiquity as a combination of the ‘black land’ of the Nile valley and the ‘red land’ of the deserts. The book is illustrated throughout with images—many taken from his own travels and including colour plates—that help bring the landscape to life. A ‘geology 101’ then follows, in which Reader maps geological time and our place in it onto a 24-hour day, before cantering through the main geological processes that built the North African landmass. While the analogy is familiar to geologists, it is a useful way to contextualise the long swathes of Egyptian, geological time.

Having completed our geological primer, we then meet the oldest rocks in Egypt, exposed in the Eastern Desert. This landscape is significant in that it provided the gold and other mineral wealth that was used later by the pharaohs to reward valour and to foster long-range trade. Next, leaping forward in time, we learn of an ocean drowning North Africa and producing wetlands, inhabited by dinosaurs that are now fossilised into the limestone bedrock. These limestones include the exceptional fossil assemblage of Wadi el-Hitan, now a UNESCO heritage site. The author’s title is a play upon the statement of Herodotus that Egypt was the ‘Gift of the Nile’ and no work on Egyptian landscape would be complete without an exposition of the long and complex history of the geography of the Nile. Reader has distilled a huge amount of scholarship to bring us a clear picture of the main phases of formation of the Nile and how they have created the fertile floodplain on which Egyptian civilisation relies.

Leaving the Nile, we then explore the Eastern and Western deserts, including the oases and the plethora of sites and inscriptions that remain from ancient times. The author's wealth of experience in leading tours in Egypt draws together a range of interesting sites and phenomena including the mysterious Libyan Desert Glass, prized as a jewel in the New Kingdom. Our tour of the deserts complete, we return to the Nile Valley to consider how bedrock geology contributed to the choice of sites for the Pyramids. There is an overview of the ancient stone-working and building techniques and their application to important monuments at Saqqara and Giza. Consideration is also given to how these monuments shaped the landscape around them.

Further south and later in time, Reader outlines how the need for secrecy in the burial of the kings, during the New Kingdom, led them to the Theban Mountain where a natural peak, al-Qurn, looking like a pyramid, presided over the cemeteries. These include the Valley of the Kings where elaborate pillared halls were cut from the limestone bedrock, before being plastered and brightly painted. The geological factors that dictated the placement of the major monuments is rounded off with Reader's conclusion that Egypt was a 'gift of geology'.

Whether you read this handbook as a series of adventures from your armchair or take it with you on your travels in Egypt, this book will be a delightful companion. The robust and compact format makes it ideal to take with you on tours or day-trips. As a comprehensive treatment of all things geological, I can think of no other source that is so comprehensive and yet so readable. I imagine that in years to come, copies will be well-thumbed in the dig library and on the tour boats. For fans of Bonnie Sampsell's (2003) *A traveler's guide to the geology of Egypt*, this book will be a welcome addition. As a handbook and as a textbook, this volume is an excellent overview of the geo-archaeology of Egypt.

Reference

- SAMPELL, B.M. 2003 (revised 2014). *A traveler's guide to the geology of Egypt*. Cairo & New York: The American University in Cairo Press.

JUDITH BUNBURY
Department of Earth Sciences
Cambridge University, UK
✉ jmb21@cam.ac.uk