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Review of Maximilian Georg, *Deutsche Archäologen und
ägyptische Arbeiter: Historischer Kontext, personelle Bedingungen und
soziale Implikationen von Ausgrabungen in Ägypten, 1898–1914*

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MAXIMILIAN GEORG, *Deutsche Archäologen und ägyptische Arbeiter: Historischer Kontext, personelle Bedingungen und soziale Implikationen von Ausgrabungen in Ägypten, 1898–1914*, Wissenschafts- und Technikgeschichte (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2023), 472 pp. ISBN 978 3 837 66484 3. €58.00

The history of science has for some time now been the history not only of professors and the learned gentry, but also of midwives, lab technicians, and working-class amateur naturalists. Assistants and subaltern knowledge workers have formed part of the personnel of the historiography of science since Steven Shapin's influential 1989 essay 'The Invisible Technician'.¹ Anne Secord and others have explored 'artisanal knowledge', showing how the sciences have often required interaction between distinct groups of people with different degrees of education, resources, or power.² In the three decades since, the social history of science has always had a presence, but recently it has met with increased interest. Last year, three journals, *Isis*, *History of Science*, and *Labor*, partnered up to publish three special issues, each dealing with different dimensions of a workers' history of science.³

One would expect Maximilian Georg's book – whose title translates to 'German Archaeologists and Egyptian Workers: The Historical Context, Working Conditions, and Social Implications of Excavations in Egypt, 1898–1914' – to fit well into this newly re-energized field. It was published in Transcript's series on the history of science and technology, and looks at local labourers employed by German archaeologists in Egypt. However, the history of science is not the author's concern. It does not feature in the book's chapters or bibliography. Georg's interest is instead in history from below, global history, and social history, as

¹ Steven Shapin, 'The Invisible Technician', *American Scientist*, 77/6 (1989), 554–63.

² e.g. Anne Secord, 'Corresponding Interests: Artisans and Gentlemen in Nineteenth-Century Natural History', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 27/4 (1994), 383–408; Anne Secord, 'Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth-Century Lancashire', *History of Science*, 32/3 (1994), 269–315.

³ 'Focus: Let's Get to Work: Bringing Labor History and the History of Science Together', *Isis*, 114/4 (2023), 817–49; 'Special Issue: Science and/as Work', *History of Science*, 61/4 (2023); 'Labor and Science', special issue of *Labor*, 21/1 (2024).

well as in postcolonial and subaltern studies. The fact that it is not a history of science is the least of the book's problems.

Georg's study deals with the excavation sites of the German archaeologists Ludwig Borchardt, Georg Steindorff, Georg Möller, Otto Rubensohn, and Friedrich Zucker between 1898 and 1914. To unearth the great Egyptian archaeological treasures that are now on display in museums in Berlin, London, and Paris, European archaeologists not only spent considerable time in Egypt but also interacted with and employed local residents. German, British, French, and Italian archaeologists—who, in the Age of Empire, competed with each other for the most spectacular finds—are credited in wall texts and historical publications as excavators of important sites and artefacts. Despite the fact that these excavations served, *inter alia*, nationalist causes, those 'who did the actual digging' (p. 17) were local workers from Egypt. It is these local working men and women whom Georg is interested in.

The vast majority of the local workforce was employed as excavators who literally unearthed the ancient sites, spade in hand. As part of this process, they also cleaned and recorded objects or supervised other labourers. Cooks, guards, and guides were also on the local staff at the sites. Hundreds of workers were engaged for these projects. In 1907 almost 600 workers were on archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt's payroll at Abusir.

This turned archaeologists into large-scale employers and human resource managers. Consequently, the resulting paperwork far exceeded the excavation reports and classification of objects. It included payrolls, cash books, and many a mention of workers in the archaeologists' journals. As authoritarian leaders of hierarchically organized enterprises, German excavation directors imposed severe punishments for mistakes or offences committed by the workforce. Workers who showed up late or were caught stealing or visiting another site could be assigned unpaid overtime, have their wages deducted, be sacked, or even whipped.

Local labourers navigated the competition between European archaeologists in complex ways and sought to make use of it where they could. Some workers preferred to dig for the English archaeologist James Quibell instead of the Germans. Quibell's clerk, who workers said was terrible at paperwork, was unable to keep track of

attendance or stop workers from stealing artefacts that they could sell to local antique dealers. Germans, in turn, prided themselves on the fact that theft was—or seemed to them—nearly impossible at their closely surveilled sites. When Quibell announced that he would only employ workers from Saqqara, those from Abusir simply claimed to be Saqqari and went unchallenged by Quibell's team.

In an effort to make individual workers known and their voices heard, Georg sketches short biographies of three Egyptian workers who are frequently mentioned in his German sources. He portrays foreman Mohammed Ahmed el-Senussi, who had worked at Flinders Petrie's excavations in Qift/Koptos, as an excavator with considerable archaeological expertise. Senussi proudly referred to himself as an *almani* (a German) and was resented by his compatriots for his loyalty to his German employers. Another foreman, and rival to Senussi, was Abu el-Hassan Mohammed, who was appreciated enough by archaeologist Friedrich Zucker that he called for a German physician to check on him when he fell ill with influenza in 1914. Hissen Mabruk ran the light railway on several German digs and was compensated when an accident at work cost him a leg. The Germans paid for a prosthesis and the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (German Oriental Society) paid him an annuity after the accident. It made sure, however, to pay it out as salary and not as a disability benefit.

In another chapter, Georg describes the workers' living and working conditions. He explains the employment of fellahin—Egyptian farmers or agricultural labourers—at archaeological excavations as an effect of the privatization of land and the proletarianization of the rural population. This is convincing, but it seems somewhat skewed to suggest that imperial archaeology was some kind of development aid because it put impoverished rural populations to work (p. 390).

Georg fleshes all of this out in enormous, sometimes tedious, detail. Historians may not have been aware how long a donkey ride between two excavation sites a mile apart took in 1901 (twenty minutes; p. 129) or what archaeological labourers ate for lunch in 1905 (bread, pulses, fruit, raw onions, dates, and—only on market days—melons; p. 227). But even as someone with a professional interest in the day-to-day business of archaeological excavations at the turn of the twentieth century, I found it hard to be excited by such information.

The practical turn has generated histories that tend to produce odd and very specific information, but readers can usually and reasonably expect these studies to elaborate on their significance; numerous studies have shown, for example, how accounting practices enabled knowledge to travel from one domain to another, or how material practices of writing, collecting, classification, and storage connected a written piece of data with an actual find in the field and thus helped establish referential chains that produce scientific reliability.

Georg makes no such effort. Terms like ‘research question’ or ‘thesis’ are hardly mentioned in the book, and never in relation to the study itself; the term *Untersuchungszeitraum* (period under study), however, comes up dozens of times—as if historians compartmentalized the past not into periods defined by relations of production, political systems, or orders of knowledge and bounded by historical caesuras, but into periods under investigation about which (alas!) one has to write dissertations. Accordingly, the reader is constantly reminded that they are reading a text written in exchange for a degree. The many references to subchapters and sub-subchapters down to the fourth level give the book the feel of an index printed in running text, constantly referring to itself. *Deutsche Archäologen und ägyptische Arbeiter* does not tell a story, nor does it make an argument; it summarizes source materials. As a result, it remains unclear what the book adds to Stephen Quirke’s *Hidden Hands*.⁴ The excavations under study here are German-led, but the workers, as Georg points out more than once, worked at both German and English sites.

This absence of analysis is troubling for other reasons as well. Like the German archaeologists it studies, the book refers to the locals as ‘Egyptians’, despite making clear in the introduction that things were really not that simple: the staff at German excavation sites were made up of men, women, and children from Egypt, but also of Nubians, Bedouin, and Sudanese who lived in the area. In the absence of a critical framework, the author fails to renounce the German archaeologists’ supremacism and even seems prepared to excuse their racism in light of the higher goal of scientific progress. Georg asks readers not to

⁴ Stephen Quirke, *Hidden Hands: Egyptian Workforces in Petrie Excavation Archives, 1880–1924* (London, 2010).

misunderstand the Germans' vocabulary, which describes Egyptians as 'inferior' (p. 278):

Since the archaeologists wanted first and foremost to serve the progress of their scientific enterprise and perceived the workers as tools or material for this purpose . . . this value judgement has no existential, but a purely logistical meaning: the 'inferior' worker, for whatever reason, apparently does not have the skills to sufficiently advance the excavation; therefore, he must be dismissed and another worker hired in his place.

Instead, readers learn that German archaeologists retained their sense of humour in dealing with the locals, wished none of them any harm, and did not long for a return to the time when forced labour was permitted at European excavation sites (p. 278).

For all the book's significant narrative and analytical faults, the wealth of detail could be helpful for historians of archaeology and Egyptology as well as of Egypt. They will most certainly find information they have never read anywhere else.

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