

## Ancient Technology

By John W. Humphrey (Greenwood Guides to Historic Events of the Ancient World). Pp. xxiv + 219, figs. 31. Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn. 2006. \$45. ISBN 0-313-32763-7 (cloth).

This volume is something of an outsider in the *Greenwood Guides to Historic Events of the Ancient World* in that it does not focus on a particular event; rather, it tries to cover the emergence and role of a number of “technologies,” which are arranged in six chapters, or essays. These are “Food and Clothing,” “Water,” “Shelter and Security,” “Transportation and Coinage,” “Recordkeeping and Timekeeping,” and “Crafts.” These broad thematic essays are bracketed by a historical and technological overview and a final chapter titled “Conclusions: Technology, Innovation, and Society in Archaeology.” This main body of the book fits into 133 pages and is followed by another 80 or so pages offering biographies of various classical Greek and Roman authors, primary documents (mainly snippets of translated text 10–20 lines long, preceded by brief comments from the author), a glossary, an annotated bibliography (mostly listing books and papers published from the 1960s to 1980s, with some younger material and more recent Internet links), and an index.

So far, so good. According to their Web site (<http://www.greenwood.com>), the *Greenwood Guides* follow a common pattern: “Through historical narratives, 5 or more topical chapters, primary source document excerpts, biographies of key figures, and bibliographies of print and nonprint resources, these volumes offer a deeper understanding of pivotal events in the ancient world.” Unfortunately, I have not been able to get a clear impression of the main target group of this book or the series overall. For the purpose of this review, I treat it as if it were aimed at undergraduate students and scholars looking for an introduction into classical ancient technology.

*Ancient Technology* is appealingly presented, with an evocative cover photograph of a Ro-

man aqueduct and numerous illustrations, many produced specifically for this book. It offers an easy-to-read narrative, refreshingly void of jargon or complicated arguments. It is, however, also free of academic references or footnotes, which makes it difficult for the reader to follow up on a particular topic or discussion. Unfortunately, for this reviewer, the style turned sour relatively quickly. Pleasant tale-telling oversimplifies complex developments and cultural realities, and it appears more and more as a patronizing reduction to written sources, which are presented as the only reliable evidence. The book provides the reader with a general sense of early attempts at these “technologies”—often referring back to conjectural Bronze Age or Neolithic events—followed by a more-or-less linear, almost teleological, account of the development to the refined achievements of classical civilization.

A few examples may suffice. Chapter 2 (“Food and Clothing”) includes a discussion about the domestication of plants and animals: “We know from the mythological stories told of Dionysos that the vine was imported into Greece from the Near East” (21). A blunt certainty that seems to accept the content of these myths at face value is discomfiting. Similarly, when discussing animal domestication, the “documents” (brief text snippets of classical authors in lieu of proper references or academic work) are curiously used. A Roman author’s perception of the conflicting interests of farmers and ranchers is hardly evidence for the context in which animal domestication took place in the Neolithic period. The wealth of available archaeozoological hard evidence, genetic studies, and biological observation would be more relevant to the claim being made and would probably modify and refine the model presented here. The problem with

the evidentiary focus of the book is later underscored: “Since most of our documentary record reflects the habits of the small wealthy class . . . it is impossible to reconstruct a diet typical of the time and place in general” (27). It may be impossible using historical sources alone, but plant remains, microfossils, isotope studies, dental studies, and the like all have a great deal to tell about the diet of past populations, whether wealthy or not.

The backbone of each chapter consists of the available written sources. Archaeological sources also appear, but mostly as illustrations for the texts and overwhelmingly in the form of architecture or the remains of machines. Texts that are clearly mythical or metaphorical overrule sound archaeological evidence. One such example is Hesiod’s sequence of metals in his famous critique of moral decline. Humphrey comments: “When Hesiod called the oldest period of human existence the Golden Age . . . he got the historical order of first use of his four metals right as well. Gold was worked long before silver, copper, and bronze” (106). Archaeological evidence points to a different sequence. In many regions, such as Europe, the Near East, South America, and China, copper was used first, followed by lead and silver. Elsewhere, the sequence was different again. Archaeology advises caution with generalizations across cultures and landscapes; this book offers little of the diversity at the center of human interactions that contributed much to the cultural richness of classical antiquity.

The limiting effect of overreliance on written sources on the content of this book is most visible in the last substantive chapter (“Crafts” [ch. 7]). Mining and metallurgy get a sound seven pages of text, reflecting the prominence of metals in literate classical society. Ceramics are considered in three pages; glass receives only one-third of a page. Archaeological and archaeometric research shows that the technology

of glassmaking and glassworking undergoes major changes in the period and region covered by this book. There are plant ash and mineral natron glasses, small-scale production of intensely colored glass and mass production of transparent glass, elite artifacts, and everyday products. Glassmaking involves a fundamental transformation of raw materials into finished objects, far beyond the changes undergone in ceramic production, and it is much more “technological” than firing pottery. Little of this is covered by contemporary authors, and hence little makes its way into this book. What is covered is wrong, unfortunately. Glass was not an invention of Egyptian potters ca. 2000 B.C.E. but emerged even earlier in small quantities in western Asia before regular production started ca. 1600 B.C.E. in Mesopotamia. Glass and glassmaking reached Egypt 100 years later, despite a much older tradition of faience production in the Nile Valley. All this—and more—we know from archaeological research, not texts. Such basic knowledge should be admitted into a book on ancient technology, whatever the source.

Giving this book to an undergraduate or layperson interested in ancient history and technology risks cementing a traditional, not to say outdated, teleological and uniform view of cultural developments. History and archaeology cover much common ground, particularly for the topic at hand. They should take note of each other’s knowledge, and even a purely historical study should be critical of its textual sources.

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