

James Henry Breasted:
Pioneer in the Study
of Ancient Egyptian
History

Ima Soporific

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The field of Egyptology is only about 176 years old; that is, only six generations have arisen since Jean-François Champollion completed the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1824. Since then, Egyptologists have seen, generation by generation, the likes of Mariette, Lepsius, Petrie, Breasted, „ern&, Habachi, and all of their respective contemporaries who have contributed their researches and understanding to the study of ancient Egypt. Now recent years have seen the torch of enquiry pass to a new generation of scholars. However, even as scholarship continues to improve, and new standards of research evolve, Egyptologists are always aware that they stand academically on the shoulders of their predecessors, accumulating new knowledge and insights and building upon and refining earlier interpretations, as well as rejecting them where appropriate. With these ideas in mind, the purpose of this paper is to place into historical context the work of Professor James Henry Breasted in the study of ancient Egypt, and, moreover, to show that his two major works, *A History of Egypt* and the *Ancient Records of Egypt* actually mark a turning point in Egyptological studies, inaugurating the era of modern Egyptology.

[... etc., etc.]

Although compared to Europe, America had come late to Egyptology and Near Eastern studies, Breasted realized that

developing the scientific methodologies of this new approach could be America's lasting contribution to these fields. In time Breasted came to realize the need to establish a new institute for the comprehensive study of the ancient Near East modeled along the lines of scientific enquiry. Sometimes he even referred to this institute as a "research laboratory."¹ Ultimately, he managed to convince some of the most rational of people, i.e., America's corporate industrial and commercial leaders, including John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (Standard Oil), Martin Ryerson (Inland Steel), and Julius Rosenwald (Sears and Roebuck). By 1919, with their help, he founded the Oriental Institute of The University of Chicago.² Here was an international center for broad-ranging interdisciplinary research in the civilizations and languages of the ancient Near East.

[... etc., etc.]

By 1905, Breasted completed editing his compendium of Egyptian historical texts, and between 1906 and 1907, he published it as the *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical*

¹E.g., James H. Breasted, "Editor's Forward," in *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 1, *Historical Records of Assyria from the Earliest Times to Sargon*, by Daniel D. Luckenbill (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1926), viii.

²James H. Breasted, *The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago: A Beginning and A Program*. Oriental Institute Communications 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 22-23.

*Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest.*³

However, as great and as useful as this collection was, it was only the second of two related publications that appeared within a year of each other. Previously in 1905, Breasted published *A History of Egypt*,⁴ which was his new and comprehensive study of Egyptian political and social history. In addition to being remarkably well written, the strength of this work was that it was exhaustively researched, and its argumentation was firmly grounded on the full body of Egyptian historical texts, as they were known then, and which Breasted had translated according to the highest grammatical standards of the day.

[... etc., etc.]

To this day, no other general history of Egypt has had a useful lifetime as extensive as Breasted's *History of Egypt*. Sixty-five years after his death, Breasted's scholarship, although dated, is still highly regarded, and as late as 1995, *Who was Who in Egyptology* cited it as, "probably the best general history of

³James H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*, five volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906-1907).

⁴James H. Breasted, *A History of Egypt: From the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (New York: Scribners, 1905).

Pharaonic Egypt ever published."⁵ Even until today, *A History of Egypt* is still useful in many ways.

A History of Egypt and the *Ancient Records of Egypt* mark a milestone in the history of Egyptology. Breasted's methodology was precise and well-considered. He intended the *Ancient Records* and *A History of Egypt* to be a related pair.

[... etc., etc.]

Late in the writing of the *Ancient Records*, Breasted was convinced that the scope of the project should be broadened to include the texts of other cultures of the ancient Near East.

[... etc., etc.]

Breasted also planned to augment his five volumes of the Egyptian historical records with seven new volumes of records of other types (economic, religious, etc.).⁶ However, the project was not to get off the ground anytime soon due to the untimely death of Harper, compounded by the advent of World War I and then the later reorganization of Breasted's department and staff to found the Oriental Institute. It was not until 1926 that two volumes of the *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* appeared, edited

⁵Dawson, Warren R. and Eric P. Uphill, *Who was Who in Egyptology, A Biographical Index of Egyptologists*, 3rd ed. rev. by Morris Bierbrier (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1995), 62.

⁶Breasted, "Editor's Forward," vii-ix.

by Daniel D. Luckenbill. Unfortunately, these were the last volumes ever to be published in the *Ancient Records* series.

Breasted spent ten years copying, collecting and translating texts for the *Ancient Records of Egypt*. Finally in 1904, he closed the manuscript to further additions, and he began the final editing of the publication. Thereafter, the great work was published in five volumes, each volume appearing separately in print from 1906 to 1907. Volumes one to four contained the historical documents themselves arranged in chronological order through the length of Egyptian history up to the Persian conquest of the sixth century B.C. Volume five consisted of various indices and word-lists that make the corpus accessible for reference and research. The specific contents of the volumes were divided as follows:

Volume 1: Dynasties 1 to 17 (c. 3050-1570 B.C.)

Volume 2: Dynasty 18 (c. 1570-1293 B.C.)

Volume 3: Dynasty 19 (c. 1293-1185 B.C.)

Volume 4: Dynasties 20-26 (c. 1185-525 B.C.)

Volume 5: Indices and corrections

The texts of each volume were arranged chronologically in order of era or king's reign.

[... etc., etc.]

On the other hand, Breasted prepared his renderings in a simple idiomatic English that was easy for any person to comprehend. As

he noted in his preface, he consciously avoided any paraphrasing in his translations, a practice that he lamented was, otherwise, too common in his day. Rather, he stated that his effort was to render the Egyptian as literally as possible without wrenching English idiom.⁷

[... etc., etc.]

As for comprehensiveness and consistency, prior to the publication of the *Ancient Records*, there was no comparable collection of translations of Egyptian texts in any language. So Breasted noted in his Preface to volume one, "no attempt has ever been made to collect and present *all* the sources of Egyptian history in a modern language"⁸ (italics added). While previously, Near Eastern scholars did collaborate to pool their translations into single publications,⁹ they never included the entire corpus of any written genre, nor did the various scholars regularize their translations to make them consistent with each other. For these reasons, styles of translations differed from

⁷Breasted, *Ancient Records*, vol. 1, *The First through Seventeenth Dynasties*, x-xi.

⁸Ibid., vii.

⁹E.g., *Records of the Past: Being English Translations of the Assyrian and Egyptian Monuments. Published under the Sanction of the Society of Biblical Archæology*, 12 volumes, ed. Samuel Birch (London: S. Bagster and Sons, 1874-1881); *Records of the Past: Being English Translations of the Assyrian and Egyptian Monuments*, new series, 6 volumes, ed. A. H. Sayce (London: S. Bagster and Sons, 1888-1992).

text to text in the same compendia, and the same words might even be translated differently. In his volumes, Breasted worked to overcome such limitations by being as inclusive as possible in his choice of documents, as well as consistent in all his translations.

[... etc., etc.]

Near Eastern scholars and the reading public were quick to recognize the *Ancient Records of Egypt* as a great achievement, and in general, they received it with enthusiasm. All the reviewers, American and otherwise, were consistent in praising the publication for its readability and comprehensiveness, as well as its epigraphic trustworthiness and philological authority. No one doubted the accuracy of Breasted's hieroglyphic copies nor the quality of his translations. What is interesting, however, was the reaction of certain English and French colleagues. The issues where they found fault sometimes reflected as much upon their own sense of nationalism and rancor against German Egyptology and the Berlin school, as much as on purely Egyptological issues. So French Egyptologist George Foucart, although praising the volumes overall, complained that Breasted ignored the work of French Egyptologists, and he neglected to include certain important French studies in his bibliography, which--on the whole--he took as a slight against the

French school of Egyptology.¹⁰ However, a dispassionate perusal of Breasted's footnotes and citations reveals Foucart's complaints to be unjustified, since there are many references to the works of French Egyptologists. Breasted later responded to these charges himself in the Preface to volume five (p. viii), where he noted that the work of certain French Egyptologists was omitted necessarily because it became available only after October 1904, when his manuscript was closed to further additions.

Similarly, while British reviews generally praised the work, some of these also could not refrain from casting their comments within nationalistic frames of references. So, e.g., one unidentified reviewer wrote: *[note proper form of the block quotation following]*

Some twenty-five years ago the Berlin School . . . gave birth to the theory that Egyptian was a Semitic language; . . . but unfortunately the professors of the Berlin School, instead of answering in detail the objections which their French, Italian, and English colleagues were not slow to bring against it, seem to have resolved to treat it henceforth as proved, and to ignore as far as may be the work of every Egyptologist who is not prepared at once to pronounce their shibboleth. This Bismarckian method of compelling the adoption of their own conclusions by hook or by crook has aroused much heartburning, and Dr. Breasted, who throughout his Egyptological career has shown himself more German than the Germans, has thought fit to adopt it. . . . Exactly one-half of the corrigenda which Dr. Breasted announces in his fifth volume are caused by

¹⁰*Journal des Savants* (June 1906): 335-336; (August 1907): 445-448.

the uncouth and barbarous system of transliteration
which forms the trademark of Berlin Egyptology. . . .¹¹

[note proper form and spacing of ellipsis points (...) in preceding quote]

Breasted was trained in Germany, and he always maintained close relations with his colleagues and teachers there, except during World War One (1917-1919). His adoption and popularization of the Berlin transliteration system did cause some resentment among those French and English Egyptologists who still had stubbornly clung to their older less precise and increasingly obsolete system. However, only a short time thereafter, the Berlin system did become the standard international system of transliteration in Egyptology, and it remains so today.

[... etc., etc....]

Ninety-four years after its initial publication, we must ask, how useful does the *Ancient Records of Egypt* remain today for both modern academic purposes and for general reading and referencing?

[... etc., etc. to the end of the paper....]

¹¹[Anon.], *The Atheneum* (July 18, 1907): 25. It is true that throughout Breasted's career, his colleagues did identify him closely with German Egyptologists and German Egyptology in general. Among most of them, this was never an issue. However, later during the hysteria associated with World War One, a few apparently went so far as to maliciously question his political loyalties and to cast unjustified aspersions against him. This issue was partially laid to rest when his son, Charles, joined the U.S. Army in 1917 with the prospect of serving on the European front (q.v., C. Breasted, *Pioneer to the Past: The Story of James H. Breasted*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 227, 234f).

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