Myth and Marvel: Medieval Muslim Writings on Ancient Egypt
By Tara Stephan

Egypt’s past is written on its landscape through pyramids, monuments, hieroglyphs, and artifacts. However, it is only relatively recently – some 200 years – that scholars have been able to read the texts and messages left behind, after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. What did local scholars think during the millennia prior to that decipherment?

People living in the Middle Ages in Egypt were, in many ways, disconnected from their ancient past, unable to read the hieroglyphs and, instead, guessing at the origins and purposes of the great monuments that dotted their cities and countryside. Even with this gap in knowledge, scholars were deeply interested in the ancient past, of Egypt and of other regions under Islamic control, including Persia, Yemen, Arabia, Greece and Rome, and Nabatean territories. Egypt’s past was especially significant due to the visibility of its
monuments, its prominent location (at times, at the center of the Islamic world), and the many stories and accounts that circulated from the Islamic tradition, Greek and Roman lore, or popular myths and legends.

How did Islamic scholars understand Egypt’s ancient past? Was there any sense of heritage; did medieval people feel as if it was their past? Was it something that we could call “Egyptology”? I argue that the diversity of ways and methods that Islamic scholars used to engage with ancient Egypt preclude a unified field of study, like we have today. Still, confining the varied approaches used by medieval scholars into one field or discipline does not do justice to their creativity in analyzing a past whose writing they could not read and whose existence was, in spite of the monuments scattered about the land, opaque. Some writers claimed to use Coptic sources for their assertions about ancient Egypt, but often these sources are no longer extant, or the author is vague about the exact text.

Medieval Islamic scholars made sense of the past through pre-existing genres and myths. In some cases, they tried to understand ancient Egypt through the lens of Islamic history; the pharaoh, at least, is present in the narratives of the prophets Moses and Joseph. The Quran, however, is less forthcoming about other aspects, so some scholars would focus on the genre of “stories of the prophets” that drew from Jewish and Christian precedents as well as popular tales. Other scholars, instead, considered ancient Egypt’s role in intellectual history to be its most significant contribution; in these accounts, its importance as a perceived originator of sciences like medicine and astronomy is key.
Some scholars combined the intellectual and Islamic traditions, especially through the mythical figure Hermes Trismegistus. He was transformed into a mystical sage over the centuries, previously attributed to the Greek god Hermes and Egyptian god Thoth. He was learned in the sciences of astronomy, medicine, and alchemy and was responsible for the *Hermetica*, a corpus of wisdom literature. While information about this figure varied in Islamic scholarship, the scholar Saʿid al-Andalusi (d. 1070 CE) identifies several “Hermeses.” In one version, he identifies Hermes with the Hebrew/Islamic prophet Enoch/Idris, commenting that this prophet was the first person to study the movements of the stars, practice medicine, and write metered poetry.

Further, Hermes/Idris is directly connected to Egypt. Saʿid al-Andalusi claims he built ancient temples (or, the pyramids) to preserve knowledge before the Great Flood. Thus, in such accounts, ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mythology, Biblical and Islamic prophets, and intellectual traditions are combined in order to give an explanation for why the pyramids were built. Similar stories, with some variations, appear in other texts.
Other explanations for the various monuments around Egypt drew on local myths. Especially popular were miraculous events that occurred when people were near or interacted with the monuments. Al-Maqrizi (d. 1442 CE) describes in his *Khitat*, a topographical work, that the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (d. 833 CE) visited Egypt and had his workers try to excavate one of the pyramids. There, according to two competing stories, they either found a remarkable vessel whose worth happened to be exactly the cost of the excavation or only a mummy’s remains. He also comments on various legends about the Sphinx. According to popular lore, it was perhaps a talisman of the Nile or responsible for repelling desert sands. Al-Maqrizi even has an explanation for the Sphinx’s lack of nose, claiming an individual became enraged at commoners leaving offerings for it, so he cut off its nose. Disfiguring faces was a traditional way to rob figural images of their power, seen also in manuscripts.

![The Sphinx, with its nose effaced. Bertrand and Paola Lazard Holy Land Collection; Album Egypte 1892. Collection provided by the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania. (Artstor)](https://www.artstor.org/)

Some scholars also engaged in the ancient past through a genre called “wonder literature.” This literature focuses on marvelous aspects of different places and include lists of monuments and myths associated with different locations of a given region or even city. As noted in al-Maqrizi’s account of the sphinx’s nose, some people were concerned about the ethics of revering the monuments of the polytheistic past. One scholar, al-Idrisi (d. 1251 CE) wrote a treatise specifically on the pyramids, arguing that they were worth traveling to and preserving, commenting on the variety of renowned individuals from Islamic history who visited them, including the Islamic Crusader hero, Salah al-Din (or, Saladin).

As with al-Maqrizi’s topographical work, wonder literature abounds in myths about the monuments. Al-Suyuti (d. 1505 CE) wrote a treatise on the pyramids including several
captivating legends. In one story, a man who entered a pyramid went missing, only to be found later naked and seemingly insane. The explanation was possession by an evil spirit from the pyramid. Al-Suyuti also describes other evil spirits living in or perhaps guarding the pyramids, including a naked woman with long hair and an old man wearing clothes like a monk. It is unsurprising that accounts of unexplained happenings and mysterious people get attributed to these monuments, themselves objects of mystery and marvel.

All of these approaches demonstrate a sense of connection, or perhaps more accurately, an attempt to make Egypt fit into an already established framework, whether that was marvels, Islamic history, intellectual heritage, or local myth. They were not one cohesive genre, although they discuss the same topic, and differ greatly in their goals from what we would consider Egyptology today. One potential exception is Ibn Wahshiya (ca. 10th century CE), who has been alternately described as a serious scholar, a storyteller, or a fraud for his texts on the ancient Egyptians and Nabateans, including one that offers translations of the hieroglyphs. While he is largely inaccurate in his “translations” and while his purposes in writing the work are unclear, perhaps one could argue that Ibn Wahshiya is a medieval Islamic Egyptologist – or, maybe he is simply inviting us to wonder.

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