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Review Article

Decolonising ancient Egypt?

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Rune Nyord. 2025. *Yearning for immortality: the European invention of the ancient Egyptian afterlife*. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press; 978-0-22-683824-3 paperback £26.

Alice Stevenson. 2025. *Contemporary art and the display of ancient Egypt*. London: UCL Press; 978-1-80-008755-2 paperback £45.

In Classics, much discussion has been taking place recently about the field's problematical roots, which are deeply entangled with colonialism. For example, several authors, including Denise McCoskey and Dan-el Padilla Peralta, have unpacked the relationships between Classics and European notions of superiority and coloniality. McCoskey (2012) has demonstrated how ancient Greek and Roman approaches to the 'Other' have shaped modern racial ideologies. Similarly, Padilla Peralta (2022: 159) has shown how Classics as a field "is a bustling performance site for racecraft", which engenders a racialised version of Antiquity that affects multiple communities and politics today. These two examples together demonstrate how European coloniality projected its own ideas of superiority onto evidence from the Ancient World in a way that was echoed in ancient distinctions between 'civilised' and 'barbarians', paving the way to various justifications of European superiority amid colonialism during the Modern Era (*c.* AD 1500–1800) (McCoskey 2018). By exploring the intricacies of European colonialism and how classical scholarship was used by colonial powers to justify their ideology and actions, these scholars are providing guidelines towards the decolonisation of knowledge and epistemic reconstitution of their field.

Other fields of knowledge concerned with the Ancient World have been equally dominated by, and often worked for, European colonialism and its attached notion of European superiority. In Egyptology, like in Classics, decolonising discourse has been limited and has taken shape in recent times mostly as historiographical analyses of how ancient Egyptians and Nubians were viewed by early scholars (e.g. Matić 2018). Critical works such as Reid's *Whose pharaohs?* (2002) and El Daly's *Egyptology: the missing millennium* (2005) reflect earlier historiographical attempts to unpack the field's Eurocentric and colonial roots and legacies. Equally, critical opinions on the ongoing enactment of Egyptology's colonial legacies, which have made Egyptian inputs to Egyptology largely invisible in theory and practice, have also pushed discussion forward (Hanna 2025).

Rune Nyord's *Yearning for immortality* consists of a major step forward in the decolonisation of the study of ancient Egypt, despite not being an explicit example of

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decolonial work. In approaching the history of European ideas concerning ancient Egyptian mortuary religion from the Middle Ages/Renaissance to modern times, Nyord recognises that "perhaps the most striking feature of European engagement with ancient Egyptian mortuary religion is how relatively little it changed over the past several hundred years in spite of the massive political, social, economic, religious and intellectual changes that period experienced" (p.249). This means that the mainstream interpretations of Egyptian mortuary religion based on the idea of a 'quest for immortality' currently accepted and reproduced, both within academia and in the media, are structurally the same ideas that took shape in Europe in modern and early contemporary history. The book provides an account of all periods of development of these ideas through assessing the work of various European authors and how the ideas put forward by some of the earlier scholars crystallised over time.

Nyord's history of ideas starts in Classical Antiquity, with a characterisation of all classical authors who devoted their writings to describing and interpreting ancient Egyptian mortuary religion. Among the classical authors discussed, the two most important ones are Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. These authors' ideas made their way into later understanding of ancient Egyptian mortuary religion until European scholars started to dismiss the validity of their claims. Herodotus's ideas on the transmigration of the soul and Diodorus Siculus's description of the judgement of the deceased as a ritual rather than something that takes place in the afterlife impacted earlier scholars until about the time of the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script in 1822. This happened, however, amid heavy Eurocentric Christian impositions on, and manipulations of, Indigenous ancient Egyptian ideas expressed in the writings of virtually all scholars engaged with ancient Egyptian mortuary beliefs, until the moment when European scholars, confident in their coloniality, dismissed anything that did not fit their model.

Nyord starts his survey of the development of European—or better still Eurocentric — ideas about ancient Egypt's mortuary religion by discussing the reception of classical authors in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In this period, the substance *mūmiyā* was used for its alleged healing properties, having been described in the eleventh century as naturally occurring bitumen, with a superior version of the product extracted from ancient Egyptian mummified bodies. This led to a widespread association between *mūmiyā*'s healing powers and the preservation of the well-preserved human bodies from which the substance was extracted. At this early stage, Christian ideas started to shape broader understandings of ancient Egyptian mortuary religion—for example, the perception that preserved mummified bodies awaited resurrection.

Later on, European scholars continued to project essentially Christian values onto the interpretation of ancient Egyptian monuments and mummified bodies. These were generally centred around the belief in the afterlife of the soul, which could inhabit mummified bodies and tombs. Despite growing competition with Christian values that had been adopted as universal rules, classical authors continued to play a role. From the late seventeenth century, when universal histories played a major part in European thinking, ancient Egypt made its way into these broad narratives which, despite their empirical basis, served clear agendas. As a result, ancient Egypt could play both a positive role as a

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source of wisdom or be considered as corrupted in comparison with higher Christian values.

In the eighteenth century, previously established attitudes continued to develop, with the caveat that Egyptian imagery became more largely available in Europe as a result of Europeans travelling to Egypt and with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt. This paved the way for various aesthetic appropriations of ancient Egypt, while Christian values continued to dominate narratives about ancient Egyptian mortuary religion. Classical sources continued to play a role in such narratives, though with growing disbelief since ideas such as Herodotus's on the transmigration of souls or Diodorus's ritual judgement did not really fit into models shaped by concepts such as 'soul', 'resurrection' or rewards and punishments in an afterlife. By the end of the eighteenth century, a method had been developed, consisting of imposing meaning onto specific ancient Egyptian images, namely representations of the weighting of the heart in the *Book of the Dead*, which became intrinsically connected with a post-mortem judgement and its results for life after death.

As Nyord demonstrates, the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script impacted little the set of European/Eurocentric ideas about ancient Egyptian mortuary religion which had, by the nineteenth century, become fully crystallised. In the first half of the nineteenth century, a clear consensus developed around "well-established ideas of judgement, rewards, and punishments with the newer notion of a journey fraught with trials, and the increasingly prominent idea that all of this was conveniently described and illustrated in the *Book of the Dead*" (pp.213–14). This worked as a basis for the modern western paradigm, still in vogue, based on the moral judgement of the dead. The key difference in relation to preceding periods is the immense empirical basis used to support such ideas, which is reflective of Egyptology's cumulative, inductive and descriptive *modus operandi*. "In other words, the very expectations that had informed European study of ancient Egyptian religion for more than four hundred years had now gained a seemingly sound empirical basis"—says Nyord (p.248).

The above summary of Nyord's reasoning does not do justice to the author's meticulous approach, which is supported with examples that allow the reader to clearly trace how earlier ideas made their way into current Egyptology. A good example is Pococke's eighteenth-century ideas about mummification—which were actually an interesting departure from the prevalent impositions of Eurocentric views onto the ancient Egyptian evidence. Pococke explained that the aim of mummification was for the deceased to resemble Osiris. The same idea was recently put forward as an explanation for the mummification of Tutankhamun's body (Ikram 2013). Being able to empirically trace the trajectory of Eurocentric and underlying Christian perspectives from their inception and crystallisation to the major role they play in current interpretations of ancient Egyptian religion is a crucial step forward to renovate Egyptology as a discipline, include Indigenous perspectives and decolonise the field.

Based on numerous examples, Nyord's book unveils the roots of ways in which Eurocentric ideas made their way into modern Egyptological thought. This echoes efforts in Classics to address the field's epistemic inequalities, which are done by deploying a historiographical approach to illuminate the impacts of such inequalities today.

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Despite acknowledging—very briefly in the Introduction—the book's decolonial potential, Nyord also notes that "it is not that the past scholars discussed here were 'wrong' in any meaningful sense" (p.262). This statement stems from the author's preoccupation with anachronism—a true "sin" among historians which seems to bother archaeologists less and who, as a result, are free to propose cutting-edge historical interpretations of their evidence. If decolonisation "is to be more than a mere buzzword, this decolonization will have to ruffle some feathers" (Padilla Peralta 2022: 169). In other words, "[t]he past cannot be changed, but it can be corrected" (Hanna 2025: 139–40). Such an approach is essential if we are serious about decolonising academic fields deeply embedded in colonial inequalities.

Strikingly, and reflecting the author's statement on anachronism above, the book ignores that the ideas discussed here emerged and were reproduced alongside the emergence and expansion of European colonialism around the world, which has major implications for thinking about decolonisation of knowledge and overcoming current colonial legacies and the inequalities scholars across the Global South have experienced for a long time. A history of ideas should always be a *social* history of ideas, otherwise it risks having limited relevance among those marginalised groups who can benefit from it today.

It is impossible to discuss European ideas about ancient Egyptian religion—or anything else for that matter—with no acknowledgement of the context in which those ideas emerged and circulated. The arrival of Columbus in the Americas in 1492 changed the world forever. It created a global structure of inequality, which Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano referred to as coloniality (Quijano 1992). Coloniality's influence extends beyond the historical period of colonialism itself, enduring as a set of fundamental inequalities. Coloniality's power dynamics are those disparities initiated by early colonialism and still reproduced through the Eurocentric construct of modernity, which is encapsulated with precision by Descartes's famous quote: "I think, therefore I am." This instantiates a stark division between 'Us' and the 'Other', which to this day lies in the core of coloniality to promote European (Global North) science as the exclusive epistemology for comprehending and interacting with the world (Lemos 2023).

To make Nyord's history of ideas a decolonial endeavour, we should amend his timeline for the development of Eurocentric perceptions of ancient Egyptian mortuary religion in light of the development of coloniality in Europe. The first, sixteenth-century stages of such a timeline were a phase in which, according to Nyord, the writings of classical authors were taken at face value, with some interpretive variation. It was a period when consensus was taking shape. Such an attitude matches dissimilar colonial perceptions of the "New World". This is most clearly illustrated in the Valladolid Debate (1550), which discussed whether the Indigenous populations of the Americas had a soul or if genocide could be pursued without guilt.

The universal histories of the seventeenth century, in which ancient Egypt played a role either as a source of wisdom or an example of corrupted values, should be seen as a direct result of the conundrum between European (allegedly) universal rationality and the cultural diversity Europeans encountered as a result of worldwide colonialism (Halmi 2023: 367). Successively, the impact of Indigenous beliefs on European coloniality through the eighteenth century and coloniality's reactions, as analysed by David Graeber

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and David Wengrow (2021), illustrate its *modus operandi* based on dismissal and epistemic erasure.

Indirectly, Nyord's history of European ideas about ancient Egyptian mortuary religion makes explicit the connections between early, colonial ideas and current ways of interpreting the ancient Egyptian past; the task of linking these ideas with the long-term structures of inequality inherent in coloniality is left for others to undertake. Yet, another issue persists in envisioning decolonial futures for Egyptology, namely the method developed within coloniality and crystallised over time, which often involves extrapolating knowledge extracted from textual sources to represent the entirety of ancient society. Does the *Book of the Dead*—or do texts in general—reflect the beliefs and practices of ancient Egypt's entire working population or in fact just the experiences of the ancient elites who produced these textual accounts?

Based on the historiographical recognition of coloniality's capillarity and power within academic fields, it is possible to envision more practical ways towards decoloniality of knowledge. In a recent *Antiquity* piece, my colleagues and I argued that the way forward is interaction and the abolition of hierarchies of knowledge (Lemos *et al.* 2025). In her new book, *Contemporary art and the display of ancient Egypt*, Alice Stevenson helps us envision interesting ways forward through practical engagements between Egyptology, art and museums. The book discusses the increasing interaction between museums with ancient Egypt collections and contemporary artists from a historical perspective, while providing insights into how art can become a powerful source of cultural and scholarly inspiration.

Based on juxtapositions of contemporary art and ancient material culture in museum galleries, the book explores the role of such settings in attracting new audiences and impacting how we think about the Ancient World. Stevenson argues that, early in the twentieth century, contemporary art influenced how Egyptologists interpreted their evidence, but in a way that emphasised aesthetics over context. Still, later in the twentieth century, contemporary art played a more critical role in museums as cultural institutions.

Stevenson adds to the discussion of how contemporary art can contribute, moving forwards, towards decolonising our understanding of ancient Egypt. The author approaches the topic based on five modalities of juxtapositions of contemporary art and ancient Egyptian material—or Egyptian 'art'—risking reproducing decontextualised approaches. These are inspiration, insertion, intervention, interdisciplinarity and invention. Based on the exploration of case studies in the UK, Italy and Germany, discussion primarily focuses on the insertion of extant contemporary works of art into ancient Egyptian art exhibitions and interventions to the museum space through especially commissioned artwork.

The author's main argument favours interdisciplinarity as a more significant way forward. Based on interviews with museum curators, Stevenson emphasises working together with artists towards significant mutual inspiration and relevance. However, if knowledge about ancient Egypt has largely originated amid European coloniality and continues to be reproduced as such, maybe we should focus instead on artistic interventions—not to the museum space, but epistemological interventions—to shake scholars up in their entrenched coloniality of thought. Interdisciplinarity in this case might presuppose knowledge hierarchies and that artists need to work with scholars, considered

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as those who can legitimately understand the ancient past, in order to be relevant. Such an attitude halts decolonial interaction rather than promoting it.

Artists from the marginalised Global South can effectively intervene to expose and overcome colonialities of knowledge and trigger renovated scholarly engagement with the Ancient World. Egyptian artist Sara Sallam explains how her art allows her to unlearn "the exoticism of my own ancient heritage, [reclaim] the representations of my ancestors and [find] ways of decolonising my gaze" (Sallam 2022: 63). Despite institutional co-optation as 'insertions', contemporary art can effectively impact and change academic narratives without having to be tamed by interdisciplinarity and without changing the rigorous nature of academic enquiry.

While fields such as Classics and Egyptology are undergoing critical reassessments of their disciplinary histories and their entanglements with the multifaceted oppressive structures of coloniality, mainstream interpretive models within these disciplines are breaking down. Scholars are struggling to envision decolonial futures due to the pervasive impact of long-standing epistemic coloniality. It is time to turn our attention to those areas of the world that have remained outside mainstream thinking—not merely for inspiration or interdisciplinary collaboration but, quoting Catherine Walsh, "to unlearn the rational modernity that (de)formed me, to learn to think out in the fissures and cracks" of structural systems of inequality (Walsh 2014). Decolonial ways forward must go beyond the mere recognition of problematic historiographies and their effects. Equally crucial is the promotion of decolonial interaction in contexts free from epistemic hierarchies, as a necessary step towards imagining decolonial futures for disciplines like Classics and Egyptology.

Yearning for immortality and *Contemporary art and the display of ancient Egypt* converge in their shared contribution to our current 'quest for decoloniality'. The former helps uncover the roots of current ways of thinking about ancient Egyptian mortuary religion in particular, and about ancient Egypt more generally. Despite not fully enacting decoloniality—partly out of a concern for anachronism—the book makes it clear that Egyptology cannot progress without a thorough revision of its (colonial) conceptual frameworks. This recognition may leave many scholars uncertain about how to move forward. However, by examining the relationships between contemporary art and ancient Egypt, Stevenson's book suggests one possible way forward. Engaging with contemporary art can be a key source of inspiration for developing innovative decolonial approaches. It is now time to explore new comparisons, relationships and interactions which—if pursued in contexts free from hierarchical boundaries—can revitalise our ways of thinking about ancient Egypt and Antiquity as a whole.

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