

# The Maya, Pashtun, and Egypt



*The Maya*  
(seventh edition)  
by Michael D. Coe  
(New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005).  
272 pp., 186 illus, 20 in color, paper  
\$22.50  
ISBN 0-500-28505-5

REVIEWED BY GREG BORGSTEDT, a *Research Associate in the American Section of the Museum.*

This is a lavishly illustrated and updated version of the gold standard of introductory books on the ancient Maya. Michael D. Coe has ambitiously summarized all the necessary information on ancient Maya history, culture, art, and archaeology to begin a journey into the complexity of Maya studies. He accomplishes this in a way that balances length with detail. The color and black & white images presented include the historically important and basic ones for understanding current interpretations of the Maya (e.g. the Leiden Plate and Tikal's Pyramid One), as well as recent discoveries (e.g. the San Bartolo murals) that advance current understandings. In this 7th edition, Coe integrates the contents of the older versions of the book—those facts vital to understanding ancient Maya culture—with new information whose value has yet to be assessed. This combination of freshness with tradition avoids irrelevant minutiae and jargon-laden details beyond the scope of an introductory book.

*The Maya* is organized into ten chapters with three appendices. Following an introductory chapter on climate, people, and topography, the next six chapters are a chronological presentation of the origins, rise, development, and transitions of ancient Maya society. Emphasis is placed on the height of Maya culture—in arts, writing, population, and government—during the Classic period (AD 250–900). New data are presented for both the preceding, Pre-Classic period, and the succeeding Terminal Classic period, or collapse, followed by a discussion of the Post-Classic period preceding the Spanish Conquest. Two chapters detail Maya culture in farming, trade, lifeways, religion, writing, and history. The final chapter dis-

cusses the importance of the modern Maya in understanding ancient Maya culture and history. Three appendices provide useful facts: a brief traveler's guide for Maya archaeological sites; an up-to-date list of ruling dynasties at Maya sites as understood through hieroglyphic texts; and a detailed list of further reading. While this alphabetical list could be categorized for easier use, it includes historically important works and newer interpretive ones.

Coe's book is often used in college courses as an introduction to the ancient Maya, and this version continues to suit that purpose. It is accessible to anyone interested in learning about the ancient Maya, with or without a background in archaeology or Maya studies. Its overview approach makes it suitable as a refresher in Maya culture and history for archaeologists who do not specialize in Mesoamerica, providing an easy transition to more detailed research.



*Secrets from the Field: An Ethnographer's Notes from North Western Pakistan*  
by Benedicte Grima  
(Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2004)  
176 pp., 16 illus, paper  
\$16.75  
ISBN 1-4208-0674-2

REVIEWED BY BEEBE BAHRAMI, an *Ethnographic Consultant, Freelance Writer, and a Research Associate in the Museum's European Section.*

In 1979, Benedicte Grima drove from Paris, where she studied Farsi and Pashto at the Institut des Langues Orientales, through Iran and Afghanistan to the Swat Valley in northwestern Pakistan. Intrepid and armed with linguistic skills, Grima began the journey of many years that would forge her into one of the world's renowned experts on Pashtun culture and language. In the decades that followed, Grima earned her M.A. in Iranian Studies from the University of Paris, followed by her Ph.D. in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, where she currently teaches Pashto. She returned to Afghanistan and

Pakistan many times, living among Pashtuns in mountain villages and valley towns, learning different dialects, and deepening her understanding and ties to the wider Pashtun culture.

The Pashtun's is not an easy culture to understand. They are fiercely tribal, absolutely gender-segregated, and operate within an unmoving, historically deep practice of "doing Pashto." This embodies norms and customs, expected behaviors, and responsibilities to others, including one of the world's most elaborate forms of hospitality.

Having published her academic treatise on Pashtun culture—*The Performance of Emotion among Pashtun Women: "The Misfortunes Which Have Befallen Me"* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992)—this new book details the behind-the-scenes, real-time, on-the-ground experiences Grima had among Pashto women and men over twelve years. These are honest and intimate accounts, lacking the scaffolding of more theoretical academic writing.

Grima's book is timely and should be a relief to anyone working in Afghanistan and Pakistan and who needs to understand the Pashtun worldview. Indeed, given the sensitivity of the West's current relationship with the Pashtun world, her book should be mandatory reading for NGO and Foreign Service personnel. It is also a must-read for any student of anthropology or gender studies, providing an all-too-rare and deeper study of the nature of fieldwork. She offers both an objective outsider's view into Pashtun culture and the perspective of an insider who has come to appreciate and love the people among whom she has lived and studied.

*Secrets from the Field* offers a rare glimpse into the true lives of diverse Pashtun peoples. It also gives an honest taste of what dedicated fieldwork can look like. Finally, it leaves the reader with such a rich understanding of a people about whom the world understands so little, that it helps foster better understanding for what is happening in that part of the world.



*Architecture and Mathematics in Ancient Egypt*  
by Corinna Rossi  
(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).  
280 pp., 102 illus, cloth  
\$100.00  
ISBN 0-521-82954-2

REVIEWED BY VANESSA SMITH, a Ph.D. Candidate in Egyptology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Corinna Rossi's book seeks to understand the ways ancient Egyptians used mathematics to construct monumental build-

ings. She begins by surveying how architectural historians have applied mathematics to Egyptian architecture to search for the Golden Section—a universal rule based on the Fibonacci Series and the constant  $\phi$  (1.618033989...). However, since these scholars use plans and maps that are frequently not to scale, the deliberate use of the Golden Section cannot be demonstrated. Instead she argues that scholars have projected their modern understanding of proportion and mathematics onto a society whose use of math was significantly different.

Rossi's own examination of Egyptian mathematical concepts indicates they did not use the Golden Section, Fibonacci Series,  $\pi$ , or even complex fractions as we understand them. Egyptian building design did not use scale drawings and models, or even detailed textual descriptions to express a building's finished dimensions, layout, and decoration. Without these, she argues, complex mathematical concepts could not be used in advance of construction.

Rossi focuses on the pyramid as a case study to determine how the Egyptians did use math in architecture. She suggests that a right-angled triangle, the *seked*, was used to establish the proper slope of the pyramid based on its desired final height. This *seked* was used both in planning and during the construction of a pyramid.

In searching for mathematical rules, a monument must be set into its broader cultural context. As Rossi points out, this must always be done with an understanding of the symbolic nature of a building, practical considerations of construction techniques, and the theoretical reasoning behind ancient mathematics. By establishing that Egyptian mathematics was not as sophisticated as some suppose and that there was a lack of architectural planning using complex math, Rossi has shown that it is virtually impossible to determine the relationship between mathematics and architecture—the main goal of her book. Certainly the Egyptians used math to construct their buildings, but unfortunately, in most cases its use is imperceptible. This forces scholars (including Rossi) to project their understanding of Egyptian mathematical concepts and construction techniques onto finished monuments, which is what Rossi frequently argues against in the first part of her book.

This book reminds us of the need to place archaeological finds within a cultural context. Rossi's discussion of mathematics in ancient Egypt and how scholars have looked at mathematics in Egyptian architecture is basic and comprehensive enough to appeal to laypeople, architectural historians, or Egyptologists. Despite its shortcoming in applicability, Rossi's book is a fascinating and worthwhile study of ancient Egyptian mathematics and architectural planning.