



Red Land, Black Land: Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

Barbara Mertz

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A fascinating, erudite, and witty glimpse of the human side of ancient Egypt—this acclaimed classic work is now revised and updated for a new generation

Displaying the unparalleled descriptive power, unerring eye for fascinating detail, keen insight, and trenchant wit that have made the novels she writes (as Elizabeth Peters and Barbara Michaels) perennial *New York Times* bestsellers, internationally renowned Egyptologist Barbara Mertz brings a long-buried civilization to vivid life. In *Red Land, Black Land*, she transports us back thousands of years and immerses us in the sights, aromas, and sounds of day-to-day living in the legendary desert realm that was ancient Egypt.

Who were these people whose civilization has inspired myriad films, books, artwork, myths, and dreams, and who built astonishing monuments that still stagger the imagination five thousand years later? What did average Egyptians eat, drink, wear, gossip about, and aspire to? What were their amusements, their beliefs, their attitudes concerning religion, childrearing, nudity, premarital sex? Mertz ushers us into their homes, workplaces, temples, and palaces to give us an intimate view of the everyday worlds of the royal and commoner alike. We observe priests and painters, scribes and pyramid builders, slaves, housewives, and queens—and receive fascinating tips on how to perform tasks essential to ancient Egyptian living, from mummification to making papyrus.

An eye-opening and endlessly entertaining companion volume to *Temples, Tombs, and Hieroglyphs*, Mertz's extraordinary history of ancient Egypt, *Red Land, Black Land* offers readers a brilliant display of rich description and fascinating edification. It brings us closer than ever before to the people of a great lost culture that was so different from—yet so surprisingly similar to—our own.

Red Land, Black Land: Daily Life in Ancient Egypt Details

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From Reader Review *Red Land, Black Land: Daily Life in Ancient Egypt* for online ebook

Carly says

~3.5

I've been a fan of MPM, aka Barbara Mertz, aka Elizabeth Peters, aka Barbara Michaels, for years. Although I've read almost every book under almost all of her names, I still love the Amelia Peabody series the best. In these books, the indefatigable Amelia Peabody, parasol in hand, defies Victorian mores to indulge her passions for Egyptology. The books are adorable Gothic spoofs, but they also manage to pack in a rather impressive amount of information about both Victorian Egyptology and the ancient Egyptians themselves.

My expectations for *Red Land, Black Land*, one of MPM's few nonfiction books, were definitely high. In fact, I don't think I took the book's own history into account. *Red Land, Black Land* was originally published in the 1960s, long before Amelia Peabody was a glimmer in MPM's eye. At the time when it was written, I think the book's style and premise were probably novel. The book presents life in ancient Egypt in a breezy, conversational narrative, focusing particularly on the experience of the middle classes and women. It reminded me rather a lot of *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* and other such "everyday life" books, but at the time when she wrote it, I think the idea was far more original. I tend to enjoy conversational, irreverent styles in such books, as long as the narration doesn't get in the way of the narrative. Unfortunately, I think that happened a bit here; devices such as the imaginary cruise down the Nile were just too cutesy and distracting for me. Her narrative voice here feels like something of a caricature, and she is unabashed about her opinionated and occasionally dismissive delivery. (She really, *really* doesn't like Akhenaten.)

My major complaint against the book was, at the same time, one of its major features: the informality. MPM talks about life in ancient Egypt as though it were pretty much constant throughout the thousands of years and hundreds of kings. I would have preferred a more rigorous approach that distinguished between different eras. I also think that MPM went a bit too far in painting her glowing portrait of the Egyptians; they may have been sophisticated and religiously tolerant, but they also kept slaves, raided their neighbors, and constructed an empire. I would have loved to learn more about those areas of Egyptian history. The other somewhat disappointing aspect actually is simply a ringing endorsement of the Amelia Peabody series: I don't think I actually learned much from this book because MPM managed to fit in so much into the series.

While it might not have been as informative as I could have wished, *Red Land, Black Land* was still a pleasant and amusing read. We get some great retellings of the more famous Egyptian fairy tales, and an exploration of the role of women in the ancient Egyptian world. As MPM points out in her introduction, while the market is now flooded with these types of books, at the time, examining the role of women and the common people was an original and fresh approach. As always, MPM has an eye for the most entertaining tidbits. I loved her discussion of the sculptures, particularly the lovely little sheikh el beled sculpture. MPM also goes into a fascinating discussion of the contrasts between the clear indications of religious morality and the prescription-style charms of the Book of the Dead, then compares those against the medical texts of the time. One of my favourite moments was her discussion of courting and love poetry, where she quotes an enamoured young man proclaiming his passion:

"If I kiss her, and her lips are open, I am happy, even without beer."

Lauren Albert says

When I was in Sixth Grade, we did a unit on Ancient Egypt. All these years and it took me until today to realize that it was the same time as the King Tut exhibit came to NY (the first time). Well, I was hooked and told everyone that I was going to be an Egyptologist. I still have a book from back then called "The Splendor that was Egypt." In Junior High, at some point I was allowed to pick any topic for my English paper. Naturally enough, like any teenage girl would, I wrote a paper entitled "Rituals of Death in Ancient Egypt." I still wonder what on earth my English teacher must have thought about that one. I went to visit my grandmother in Miami around the same time (7th or 8th grade) and I remember her taking me to the library and my taking out these huge museum books on Ancient Egypt. I sat at the pool in the heat with the plastic dust jacket covers sticking to my legs. All the old folks came over to find out what I was doing and they must have thought me as strange as my English teacher did.

The interest faded over time but perhaps a rush of nostalgia led me to Mertz. I don't remember reading it when I was young but if not, I'm surprised I never did. She has a fun, debunking style to her writing-making affectionate fun of the tendency of Egyptologists to see facts where there is only possibility. "[W]e enjoy our fantasies immensely," she writes, "particularly when we label them 'theories' and get into exciting arguments with other archaeologists." She is a "just the facts ma'am" Egyptologist but with a smile. She shares all the evidence for and against theories and makes it clear what is actually known as opposed to what is hoped for or guessed at.

My favorite section was her explanation of magic in Ancient Egypt. It is a very good discussion of how to see things as they did, rather than as we do (magic, science and religion not being seen as separate, for instance). Overall this is a very good introduction to life in Ancient Egypt.

Lois Bujold says

Continuing my recent Barbara Mertz explorations. I'd not read her nonfiction before. Excellent, mm, brief social history of life in ancient Egypt, starting at birth and ending with death, although the nature of the archeology makes it backloaded on the death end. Very nice change from the sorts of histories that consist of king lists, politics, and more drearily repetitive war chronicles than a shonen anime. It has also a guide to further reading at the end that sounds pretty enticing, curated I have no doubt to screen out the goofball stuff. I see she also has a companion volume, *Temples, Tombs, and Hieroglyphs* that apparently contains more chronological history, which might also be a good place to jump from here.

I was glad to find this updated e-edition at my public library, instant large print on my tablet.

Ta, L.

Jovaras says

Puiki knyga, labai nuosekliai išdėstyta visa senovės Egipto istorija ne akcentuojant faktus, o labiau perteikiant senovės egiptiečių gyvenimą.

Charles says

Some of the reviews of this work criticize it for extraneous comments, but because I love her wit so much, I am willing to forgive her even when she makes occasional ignorant comments in the field of theology.

The book is a delightful romp through ancient Egyptian history and culture. I loved every minute of it. Also, the audio book was read by someone who I believe captured her personality very well. I look forward to reading one of the Amelia Peabody books.

Ben says

An excellent, if at times dry, overview of life in ancient Egypt.

Organized from birth to death and afterlife, this is a very good primer on what life was like, how it was lived, and what the norms were likely to have been in ancient Egypt over the centuries.

I was surprised to find that the chapters describing the blend of magic, religion, science, and medicine were my favorite while those retelling the myths and the afterlife were a bit more of a slog for me. I think what struck me was how these concepts that are disparate in modern Western thinking were mixed together and each used together for practical purposes in ancient Egypt.

Treece says

Rating: 4 1/2 stars

This book written by the amazing Egyptologist (and author aka Elizabeth Peters/Barbara Michaels) is wonderfully narrated by actress and writer, Lorna Raver. You are literally taken from the birth of an Egyptian to daily life, to occupations and various and sundry countless things that comprised the Egyptian civilization. There is a large area that is devoted to the in/outs of why death was so important to these people. I also gained a better sense of who they were and how they viewed the world with solid pragmatism. What would have been challenging to read at times came to life under the sharply witty, intelligent and vivacious Raver who brings to life Mertz's personality and knowledge.

Believe me, Mertz doesn't pull any punches either. She reveals the up/downs of life during this time and takes time to mock people who believe they are a reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian. If this happened to me, I would be glad to escape into a more comfortable existence, not to revisit it.

Sandy says

Barbara Mertz is my favorite author in the world. She is a lady who got her degree in Egyptology before "Ladies" did so. She is known for her 2 non fiction books and her numerous fiction writing. This book is older than me and was recently revised and published. I would recommend it to anyone who has even the vaguest interest in Ancient Egypt. Her writing style is very approachable and entertaining as well as spot-on accurate. She is biased towards and against some theories but unlike most she freely and humorously admits it. She has written approx 60 fiction novels. She has written a number of Gothic Suspense novels under the name Barbara Michaels. (I am not too crazy about these) Under the name Elizabeth Peters she has written two series. The Viki Bliss series is fun. Vicki is a sexy strong archeologist who solves antiquities mysteries and is set in somewhat contemporary times. (new book coming out this August) My most favorite series in all the world is her Amelia Peabody series. Set in Victorian times Amelia Peabody is not your average Victorian English lady. She is an archeologist who spends most of her time in Egypt, has an umbrella with a steel rod in it so she can bat evil doers over the head with it, she has a tool belt she wears that holds all the necessities for if she is trapped in a tomb or captured by the master criminal. LOVE THIS! This series also holds a lot of tongue-in-cheek high-drama humor and dastardly criminals.

Tammy says

This is a very informative and fascinating peek into life in ancient times in Egypt. The author, although a noted Egyptology scholar, writes in a sweet, simple conversational style. She relays touching anecdotes such as the mummified cat of a minor prince with an inscription translating roughly as "Miss Kitty, beloved pet". She goes into the everyday objects and experiences such as the cosmetic procedures, style of dress (flattering only on very slender people she points out), and the practice of painting the ceilings with clouds and the floors with water scenes. I've always had a fascination with Egypt, and much more now!

Bettie? says

~14hours

How to be an ancient Egyptian: all you need to know about clothes, pyramids and papyrus.

What a refreshing voice on a dusty subject...

...Elizabeth Peters writing under her real name and profession as an Egyptologist but the wry voice is unmistakable.

Erica says

“This is not a book about ancient Egyptian culture; it is a book about ancient Egyptians.” Barbara Mertz starts out her book with this line, and it perfectly describes her work. “Red Land, Black Land” gives details of Egyptian life in different periods of history. She traces life from birth to death in all the myriad ways life can go.

Mertz has a pleasant, conversational tone throughout the book that makes it feel more like you’re listening to her describe a personal experience over tea rather than reading a lecture on a time long past. I especially loved the chapter where she took the reader on a mental trip down the Nile. One thing I didn’t know was how popular touring the monuments was even at the time they were built.

One of the best aspects of the book is her cautious skepticism when it comes to “expert opinions”. The study of ancient civilizations is an evolving process. Each year, scholars learn a little more about the language and writing, or scientists develop better technology for examining artifacts, and something is discovered to be different than what was once considered fact. Mertz’ refusal to equate theories with facts and to emphasize the subjectivity humans are never entirely free from (and admitting when she prefers a theory for subjective reasons) may make it less popular with those who want “just the facts, ma’am” but is a more realistic touch to the subject.

It was a fun, informative read, and I definitely enjoyed her style of writing. I was pleasantly surprised to find she is also one of my favorite authors: she writes the fabulous Amelia Peabody series under the pseudonym Elizabeth Peters, which is one I recommend to anyone who enjoys learning more about ancient culture along with some great mysteries.

Theresa Larson says

So I loved Barbara Mertz’s Amelia Peabody series, and I thought I would really enjoy this nonfiction book she had written. I loved the conversational style of the text, and the way she approached the topic, but I didn’t really feel like I walked away with anything. Perhaps if I hadn’t studied Ancient Egypt with the kids, I would have gotten more from this book. The information, however, seemed fairly basic and didn’t provide a really unique perspective.

Andrea says

I love Barbara Mertz and her genuine passion for Egypt. I had no doubt that I would thoroughly enjoy yet another book by her. As opposed to *Temples, Tombs & Hieroglyphs: A Popular History of Ancient Egypt*, which focused on the chronological history of Egypt and its rulers, *Red Land, Black Land* is more of a sweeping overview of Egyptian culture. She touches upon such interesting topics as medicine, food, household, women's rights, and of course pyramid building among others. There are some interesting connections between this volume and the first book in the Amelia Peabody series *Crocodile on the Sandbank*, which made me smile. For anyone interested in getting into Egyptology, I would certainly recommend reading first *Temples...* and then *Red Land...* as a good, solid intro on the subject.

Petra CigareX says

The blurb might say "delightfully personal style" but that's because it's advertising. I seriously don't want to hear irrelevant personal opinions and interjections such as 'one day I'm going to get that piece of furniture copied' from an author who considers herself an academic Egyptologist. Nor do I want conjectures about why such an advanced civilization had no military tactics or training whatsoever. Of course they did. Just because no trace of something is found doesn't mean it didn't happen. They conquered Kush and other lands just by sending a rag tag band of untrained soldiers to the front and told them shoot arrows and stab anyone? I don't think so.

I read some books late last year, the TTC lectures on ancient history and there is quite a lot that contradicts this author. Firstly she says that women were by and large illiterate. The TTC lectures say that there was 80% literacy among women. Many shopping lists on papyrus have been found. You really think that men wrote out shopping lists for the illiterate women to take to the market and thrust at what must have been male traders to read for them? Makes no sense.

Nine chapters of this I have suffered through. No more. It's just too personal, not scholarly enough and she presents evidence when it suits her and opinions when it doesn't. Barbara Metz, is better known as the author Elizabeth Peters, she of the mysteries set in ancient Egypt and also as the novelist Barbara Michaels. As far as I am concerned, she should stick to exercising her imagination in fiction.

Denise says

Barbara Mertz has a PhD in Egyptology. She is, therefore, enough of a scholar to know what she is talking about when it comes to the culture of ancient Egypt. That said, I didn't much care for this book. I was glad that it wasn't another "dry" discussion about Pharaoh XYZ and Middle Kingdom ABC but IMHO the author was flippant and seemed to throw facts to the reader willy-nilly. She jumped back and forth on subjects, told us she had a personal opinion on certain debatable topics and then declined to tell us that opinion so we could accept/refuse it on our own. 3/4's of the way through the book I was counting pages to see how much more was left to read (a death knell for a book!). There was some information that I had been unaware of (and was interested to learn) but aside from those all I can truly say is that I did read this book and am moving on to other authors.
