

*Constructing the Sacred: Visibility and Ritual Landscape at the Egyptian Necropolis of Saqqara.* Elaine A. Sullivan. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. Digital Project. ISBN: 9781503603332.

Elaine A. Sullivan's *Constructing the Sacred: Visibility and Ritual Landscape at the Egyptian Necropolis of Saqqara* is a unique addition to the study of royal and elite sacred landscape production in the ancient world. A born-digital project culminating in a 3D reconstruction of Saqqara which allows readers to explore three-millennia of landscape creation at the site, *Constructing the Sacred* situates Saqqara within the broader ritual landscape of pharaonic Egyptian ceremonial practice and monumentalism by comparing it with necropolises at Abydos, Amarna, Giza, and Thebes. The author argues that these geographies followed a consistent practice of landscape production and acted as powerful settings that reinforced dominant social ideologies and political authority, albeit influenced by local interests and traditions.

*Constructing the Sacred* is available online. There are eleven sections, most of which include subsections which expound sacred landscape development in pharaonic Egypt. These cover a range of topics appropriate to an historical study, including a section on the evolution of ceremonial practice and space at Saqqara, a section that explores similar dynamics at other elite necropolises, and a section that brings these together to support Sullivan's thesis. Several of the sections include digital renderings of the landscapes which readers can explore. "Saqqara Through Space and Time," for example, visualizes major architectural features of Saqqara's core area temporally and spatially, presenting an overlapping visual narrative that enables users to tour "real" spaces from the past. This serves as the entrée to larger questions addressed by later sections in the study, including situating specific monuments and design features and elements into a lexicon of Egyptian ritual landscape creation.

The section, "The Hidden and the Seen," explores common strategies used by Egyptians to construct sacred landscapes at Saqqara, specifically how visibility was manipulated to create a sense of sacred funerary space at the site. While Sullivan acknowledges that the choices made by designers changed according to variations in taste and socio-political realities, they contend also that some visual strategies remained consistent, including monument shape and certain design elements, incorporating the manipulation of rays of light to emphasize aspects of the divine, common iconography, and the use of capstones to draw observers' attention. The section concludes with interactive 3D renderings to relate the narratively detailed findings back to the site. Readers can navigate these mapped areas to connect Sullivan's findings with the physical space.

In "Widening the View," Sullivan gleans from the practice of monument reuse and graffiti a sense of how the panoply of ancient Egyptian observers might have understood the funerary ritual spaces they interacted with at Saqqara. While the author concludes that generally visitors of all statuses would have understood the function and basic activities of the tomb spaces, the meaning differed. For illiterate sub- or non-elites, figural graffiti based on the Egyptian iconographic vocabulary indicated an appreciation of symbolism and its connection with ritual space, but was possibly an expression of personal piety than of a comprehension of wider cosmic implications of a particular tomb at the site. Monument reuse by sub- and non-elites in funerary

contexts likewise does not signify an understanding of the ritualization of the monument typical of elites, reuse implies awareness of the connection between monumentalism and memorialization.

In “Constructing the Sacred at Royal Funerary Landscapes in Egypt,” Sullivan argues for consistencies between the ritual landscape constructions at Saqqara and those of other elite and royal necropolises. In addition to visual strategies outlined above, a further constant is the integration of such sites into larger “cosmic landscapes” which connected various spaces through networks of ritual movement, as well as the adaptation of ritual to specific environments and traditions. Old Kingdom symbolism at Giza, for example, is rife with images of the rising and setting sun, connecting the eternal processes inherent of the celestial sphere with the “deceased king joining with the sun god in the solar cycle” and then “descending into the netherworld.” Sullivan writes that solar theology also likely informed the layout of Amarna. Here, archaeologists have connected sight lines from the tomb of Akhenaten with stelae found across Amarna and have conjectured that they metaphorized the beams of the radiant sun. Similar patterns have been detected at Saqqara.

In “Ritual Movement,” Sullivan examines processions which integrated royal cemeteries with corresponding state temples across Egyptian history. These processions brought the state religion into the sacred ritual space of royal and elite cemeteries, strengthening the connections between these spaces and the official religion, and transforming the necropolises into spaces where the gods were made manifest. A prime example of this was the Khoiak festival at Abydos, which reenacted the myth of the death and rejuvenation Osiris. Over the course of several days, pilgrims processed along a route which connected the temple of the god, located on the edge of the desert, with his supposed tomb, which was located deep in the desert at Umm el-Qa’ab.

Section 6 details the making of the 3D model of Saqqara, while Section 7 provides a conclusion in which the thesis is recapitulated and an argument is made for the use of 3D modeling in the future of Egyptology, particularly that aimed at the recovery of ancient landscapes which have largely disappeared. Section 8 enables readers to download the metadata used to generate the reconstructions found in the study.

The methodology employed to render legible Saqqara’s sacred landscape, which is now largely denuded, is quite innovative and makes the entirely digital nature of the study necessary. This, though, is also a weakness; scholars accustomed to the ease of searching a book’s index or mining the notes of a journal article will find the tools to navigate the source material used for Sullivan’s study unwieldy. There is no index as such, however readers can use a search feature for key terms. I doubt that *Constructing the Sacred* will find an audience among history instructors beyond use as an aid in a lesson on ritual landscape development. It is, however, quite likely that Sullivan’s study will find an audience among the more interdisciplinary minded in the digital humanities. In bringing together GIS, history, anthropology, and archaeology virtually, *Constructing the Sacred* is a good example of the potential for collaboration to open new vistas on centuries-old historical questions.

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