Egypt through the Stereoscope: Stereography and Virtual Travel*

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Abstract

Examines how stereographs were used as a means of virtual travel. Focuses on James Henry Breasted's "Egypt through the Stereoscope" (1905, 1908). Provides context for resources in the Travelers in the Middle East Archive (TIMEA). Part 3 of a 4 part course called "History through the Stereoscope."

1 Stereography and Travel

According to stereography's advocates, stereographs allowed people to "tour" foreign lands without the expense and hassle of actually going there. Moreover, virtual tourists could look at the sites as often and as long as they liked, and three-dimensional imaging added to the sense of reality. As Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "the sights which men risk their lives and spend their money and endure sea-sickness to behold,–the view of Nature and Art which makes exiles of entire families for the sake of a look at them, and render 'bronchitis' and dyspepsia, followed by leave of absence, endurable dispensations to so many worthy shepherds,–these sights, gathered from Alps, temples, palaces, pyramids, are offered you for a trifle, to carry home with you, that you many look at them at your leisure, by your fireside, with perpetual fair weather, when you are in the mood, without catching cold, without following a valet-de-place, in any order of succession,–from a glacier to Vesuvius, from Niagra to Memphis,–as long as you like, and breaking off as suddenly as you like" (38-39). Not only does stereography make "travel" more comfortable and convenient, but, Holmes implies, it also allows the viewer in a sense to "own" the scene, to place it into a viewer and stand gazing over it (Fowles 91). Note that Holmes uses Egyptian sites such as the pyramids and Memphis as examples of important places for travelers to experience, revealing the significance of Egypt as a place for virtual travel.

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Figure 1: "The entrance to the Great Pyramid, the sepulcher of Khufu (in north face), seen from below." Stereograph. Breasted, James Henry. *Egypt through the Stereoscope* (NY: Underwood and Underwood, 1905, 1908). From TIMEA[1]. (August 19, 2006). http://dspace.rice.edu/handle/1911/5593[2]

By making images of foreign cultures available cheaply and with seeming realism, stereographs enabled mass "virtual" tourism. Stereographs could serve as mementoes of travel, or substitutes for it. Among the most popular locations for armchair travelers to venture via stereography were the Holy Land and Egypt, since these places had special religious significance and featured important archaeological sites, some recently excavated. As William Darrah notes, "A steady stream of stereo views depicting the classic antiquities of Rome, Naples, Athens, Egypt and the Holy Land, together with those of the cathedrals, public buildings and palaces of the tourist centers of Europe provided mementos of the journey and vicarious adventure for those who had to remain at home" (17). Companies organized stereograph collections into "tours," capturing the major sites and simulating travel to them. Stereographs helped to define the public's understanding of foreign countries and expectations of what travel there would be like. As Steven Hoelscher argues, "Acquiring photographs gives shape to travel as it informs what the viewer should see, how it should be seen, and when it should be seen–all in a matter-of-fact and seemingly "unmediated" way" (549). Just as guidebooks offered a mediated journey through foreign countries, so stereographs presented travel from carefully chosen perspectives. Sometimes working with "experts" on the countries represented, stereograph photographers and publishers determined what sites to photograph, what perspective to take, and how to frame the shot.

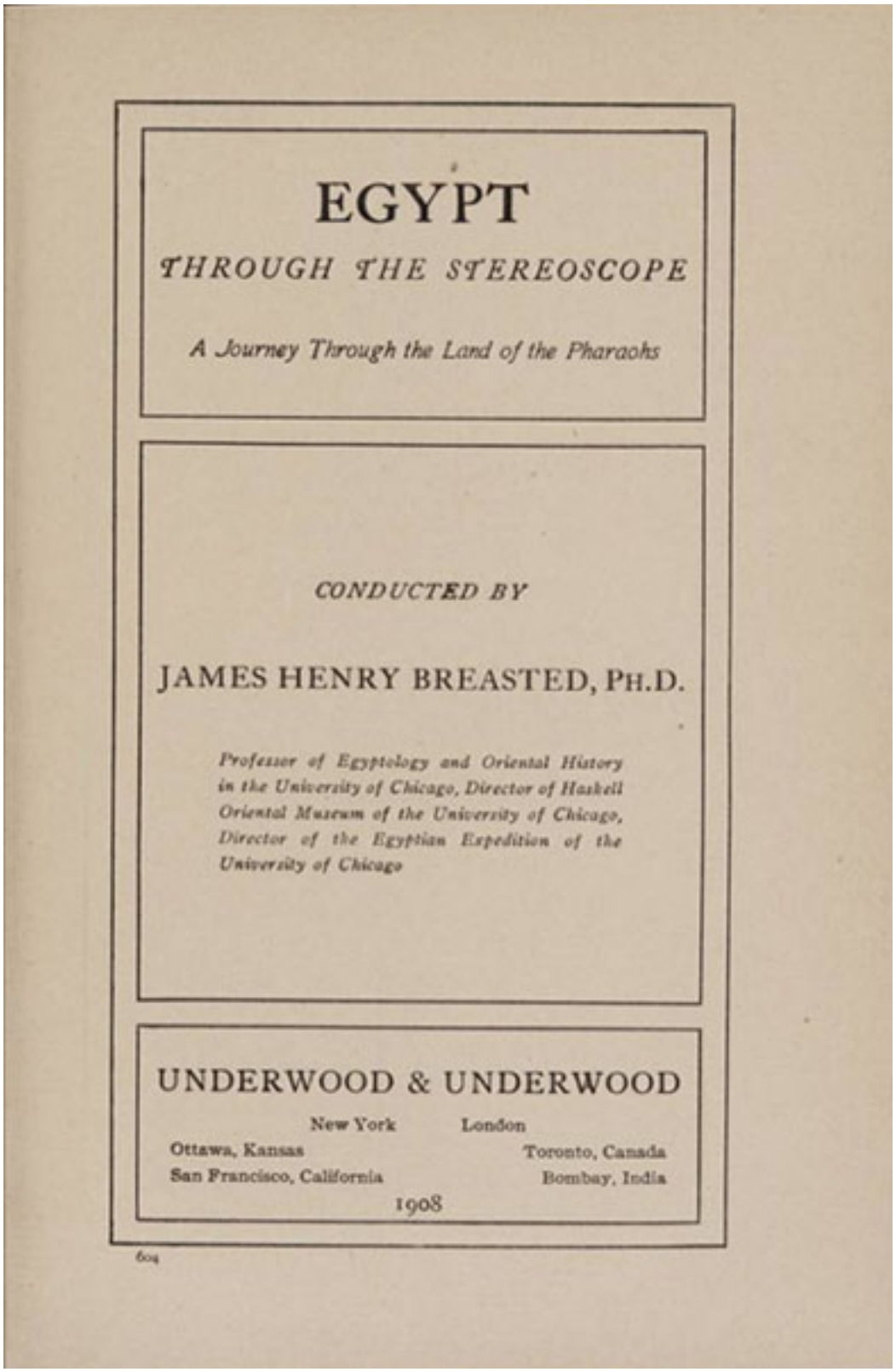
Around the same time that photography was being established as a leading form of art and communication, Egyptology, the study of Egyptian civilization, was becoming an important field of study. Egyptologists used photographs to document and study their findings, while photographers helped to feed the public interest in Egypt with their stunning views of the country's monuments, artifacts, historic sites and daily life. In the late 1850s, photographer Francis Frith toured Egypt and produced **Stereoscopic Views of the Holy Land, Egypt and Nubia**. Reviewing Francis Frith's exquisite stereographs, **The Times**of London raved, "You look through your stereoscope, and straightway you stand beside the fabled Nile, watching the

[1] http://timea.rice.edu/
[2] http://dspace.rice.edu/handle/1911/5593

crocodile asleep upon its sandy shore, with the superb ruins of Philae in the distance. The scene changes, and you are in the Desert.... "(qtd. by Evans). Beginning in the 1870s, photographers based in Egypt such as G. Lekegian and J. Heyman & Co. produced stereographs, selling particularly to tourists. US publisher Underwood and Underwood made a boxed set of stereographs focusing on Egypt that William Darrah calls "the best stereo representation of the region ever published" (132).

2 James Henry Breasted's Egypt through the Stereoscope

Egyptologist Dr. James Henry Breasted (1865-1935) was likewise impressed by the Underwood stereographs of Egypt: "Having seen the Oriental photographs of Mesrs. Underwood & Underwood, I am very glad to testify to their unusual beauty and value, and to assure the publishers that their collection offers to the purchaser a very vivid and adequate picture of the countries and peoples illustrated" (qtd. by Evans). Since Breasted was recognized as a leading expert on Egypt, Underwood sought his endorsement and invited him to write a guidebook to accompany a boxed set of Egyptian stereoviews. Breasted came to the study of Egypt through his interest in religion. Skeptical about the historical accuracy of the Bible, Breasted went to Yale University to study Hebrew with William Rainey Harper. When Harper became president of the University of Chicago, he recruited Breasted to teach Egyptology in the university's department of biblical studies and sent him to study at the University of Berlin with noted Egyptologist Adolf Erman. Breasted received his Ph.D. from the University of Berlin in 1894, writing his dissertation on Pharaoh Akhnaten's hymns to the sun god. He and his new wife Francis Hart toured Egypt for their honeymoon in 1894, taking a two-month cruise along the Nile and stopping at historic sites along the way. Breasted returned to the US and became a faculty member at the University of Chicago and assistant director of its Haskell Oriental Museum. Breasted gave lectures about Egyptian history and culture throughout the US, which honed his ability to communicate with a non-academic audience. He built a reputation as the United States' leading Egyptologist with the publication of two works: Ancient Records of Egypt (1906-1907), a five-volume translation of historical inscriptions until 525 B.C., when the Persians first conquered Egypt; and A History of Egypt (1905), a chronological survey from prehistory to 525 B.C. He also published a popular textbook, Ancient Times: A History of the Early World (1916). Breasted made an important contribution to the field of ancient Near Eastern studies by establishing the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, which became a leading research center (Van De Mieroop).



EGYPT

THROUGH THE STEREOSCOPE

A Journey Through the Land of the Pharaohs

CONDUCTED BY

JAMES HENRY BREASTED, PH.D.

Professor of Egyptology and Oriental History in the University of Chicago, Director of Haskell Oriental Museum of the University of Chicago, Director of the Egyptian Expedition of the University of Chicago

UNDERWOOD & UNDERWOOD

New York London

Ottawa, Kansas Toronto, Canada

San Francisco, California Bombay, India

1908

604

Figure 2: Title page to James Henry Breasted's *Egypt through the Stereoscope* (NY: Underwood and Underwood, 1905–1908). From TIMEA[3]. (August 19, 2006). http://dspace.rice.edu/handle/1911/9166

Breasted embraced the educational potential of stereographs, recommending "this system of stay-at-home travel" for accurately reproducing the monuments and historic sites of Egypt and conveying viewers to the past (11). Even if people could not afford to travel to Egypt, Breasted said, they could enjoy "a vivid prospect" on 100 carefully selected sites, learn about Egypt, and become a "citizen of the world" (12, 13). As Evans notes, "He envisioned its benefits and great importance to stimulating interest in Egyptology and attracting young recruits. Underwood and Underwood also knew the attraction Egypt had, even more so in the Victorian age of Egyptomania." Thus in 1901 Breasted agreed to write a guidebook for Underwood that would accompany a set of 100 stereoviews. Underwood asked Breasted to "...put what he has to say in the first person much as he would talk as if he could stand with a person in the presence of the actual places" (letter from Underwood and Underwood, July 31, 1901; qtd. by Evans). From the stereographs created by photographer Charles H. Baker, Breasted selected the 100 views that were included in Egypt through the Stereoscope and wrote the accompanying text, completing the 360 page book in 1905. In the introduction to *Egypt through the Stereoscope*[4] , Breasted touted the ability of the stereoscope to make a distant place seem real and allow close study: "In the preparation of the following pages, I have constantly had my eyes within the hood of the stereoscope, and I cannot forbear to express here the growing surprise and delight, with which I observed as the work proceeded, that it became more and more easy to speak of the prospect revealed in the instrument, as one actually spread out before me. The surprising depth and atmosphere with which the scientifically constructed instrument interpreted what were actually but bits of paper and pasteboard, were a revelation; indeed, I constantly sat by an open window looking out over the actual ruins of the Nile Valley, which I could study, one after another, at will" (13). Breasted embraced the technology of stereoscopy, marveling at the way that carefully constructed devices could simulate distant monuments. As Evans notes, "Breasted was intensely interested in new methods and new techniques in recovering early chapters of man's history, but chiefly in promoting a new attitude to and a new interpretation of the past." In 1908, a second edition of Egypt through the Stereoscope and the accompanying stereocards were issued. Egypt through the Stereoscope and most of the accompanying stereographs are available through the TIMEA project.

3 References

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[3] http://timea.rice.edu/
[4] http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9166
[5] http://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu/newresearch/stereoscope/stereoscope.htm
[6] http://www.anb.org/articles/14/14-00069.html