



KRITSKI G. 2015: THE TEARS OF RE: BEEKEEPING IN ANCIENT EGYPT. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 133 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-936138-0 (hbk). Price GBP 19.99.

The title of the book reflects Egyptian mythology: When the sun god Re cried, his tears turned into bees upon touching the ground. For this reason the honey bee was sacrosanct in ancient Egypt. It may explain why the honey bee is a surprisingly common and important object in Egyptian history, both in the mythology, art, medicine and food of this ancient culture. The author, Gene Kritski, an entomologist who specialized in apidology and history of biology, spent a year in Egypt as a Fulbright scholar in 1981–2, which initiated his interest in Egyptology. Since then he has published several papers, not only on Egyptian beekeeping, but also on Egyptian mythology, Egyptological history and archaeology. The reviewed book presents the first comprehensive review and discussion of the ways in which bees were a part of life in ancient Egypt. The author explores the importance of the honey bee in everything from death rituals to trade. By examining the relationship between the ancient people that lived on the banks of the Nile and this beneficial insect Kritski brings new evidence of how advanced and fascinating the ancient Egyptians were.

The book begins by presenting the very first historical evidence of a human interaction with bees depicted on a Mesolithic painting found on a cliff in Spain dated 7,000 to 8,000 years before present. The earliest societies that developed true beekeeping practices lived in areas with naturally abundant honey bee forage, most likely in the Fertile Crescent some 2,000 years later, coincidentally with the rise of agriculture, in times when human societies began living in settled communities, domesticated grain and mastered pottery or basket making, the products that could have provided the first artificial manmade cavities for bees to occupy. In the following five chapters the author expertly deals with beekeeping practices and their development during consecutive periods designated as The Old Kingdom, The Middle Kingdom,

the New Kingdom and The Saite Dynasty. Kritsky explores the archeological evidence for Egyptian beekeeping and discusses newly discovered tombs with carved inscriptions of the traditional hives. As an expert well familiar with other aspects of ancient Egyptian history he is able to correlate the excavated archeological artefacts and reliefs of scenes relating to apiculture that adorned walls of temples and tombs with the religious and political situation in this ancient society. The top chapter of this historical excursion deals with the rise and fall of ancient Egyptian culture during Egypt's Ptolemaic and Roman Eras, when both agriculture and honey production flourished. The last hieroglyphic inscription was carved in 394 A.D., which historians mark as the end of the 3,500 years old Egyptian culture. Chapter seven deals with the honey bee hieroglyph; the first of which was carved over two centuries before the pyramids at Giza were built and the last one three and a half millennia later. During those years a number of glyph variations appeared that would compose a whole ancient Egyptian beekeeping lexicon, and linguists will be fascinated by the erudite discussion of the evolution of the honey bee hieroglyph. The remaining five chapters deal with the administration and economics of Egyptian beekeeping, bees as food and medicaments providers, bees as subjects of sacrificial rituals and mythological feasts. The penultimate chapter deals with the use of beeswax in religion, medicine and material arts as an adhesive, an embalming agent, a light source and a medium for creating some of the most beautiful art of that time. The volume ends with a chapter on the afterlife in terms of ancient Egyptian beekeeping discussing the apiculture and honey production practices in Egypt from the days of the early Egyptian Christians (i.e. after the closing of all non-Christian temples in the 4th century A.D.) till today.

Richly illustrated and engagingly written, the Kritski's monograph will appeal to anyone with a passion for beekeeping, Egyptology, or the ancient world in general. It will become a compelling reference work on the subject for many years to come.

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