

Review of **Sacred Nile** in [www.routes-mag.com](http://www.routes-mag.com) (October 2021)

There are several ways to read a photography book. You should not just read through it once; flip through the pages and randomly find intriguing shots; go through the whole book from start to finish; then search out the photographs that most caught your attention. And when you read through **Sacred Nile: Where It All Began** by Chester Higgins Jr. with Betsy Kissam, you will find yourself returning time and again to absorb these photographs of the Nile River and its timeless beauty.

For more than five decades, Higgins has made several journeys to and taken photographs of Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan. These photographs of nature, of people (singular portraits and groups), of man-made wonders such as pyramids, obelisks, statues, paintings, glyphs and so much more, are wonderful works of art that can be appreciated with a quick glimpse as well as a deliberate, lengthy study.

Highlighting the multiple links between the Nile and spirituality, the religions and faiths that have grown up around this every-powerful body of water, **Sacred Nile** combines the studies of religion, art, history, geography, natural sciences, and more. There are photos here that document all times of day, from sunrise to late at night.

The essays in the book explain and enrich the photographs, offering an educational basis that will spur many readers to do further research into select topics.

And there is much to ponder here, from the ancient religious beliefs and goals of people then and now, to marvelling at the artistry of age-old glyphs and paintings and other artworks. We learn about the religious and cultural customs of those who worship nature, Bete Israel Jews, Christians, and Muslims. We also learn about the many links and similarities between these faiths. The strength of the word "Amen" is examined here, and it is a humbling study.

At times you will find yourself drawn to the portraits of people, individual shots and groups, the people clad largely in traditional clothing (with some contemporary styles mixed in). At other times you will ponder the pictures of pyramids, holy books and colorful umbrellas and other items created by people. And then there are the photographs of sky, water, sand, stars, trees, flowers, and more: I admit those were among my favorites, awe-inspiring images of timeless quality. There are photographs that are of huge spaces, and others of small, detailed intensity.

A few things depicted here I found particularly interesting: photos of people clasping and playing the musical instrument called the *sistrum*; the carved in stone false doors/spirit doors; and papyrus boats. Make sure to read the Epilogue and the Acknowledgements. But some of what is written here is about speculation: we don't have enough information to make certain determinations about reasons for and ultimate purposes of much of the artwork found in the pyramids and elsewhere. The study of these objects will be ever ongoing. "Until that time, we can contemplate and imagine."

Just as water is a key part of **Sacred Nile**, so is stone. There are so many photos showing stone, used to create lasting structures, as well as carved with text and messages meant to last for so many years. And the fact that so many of these ancient pieces have survived is heartening; we can see the aspirations of people from so many years ago.

Here and there we read about Higgins's struggles from a technological framework: lighting issues and how best to use lighting equipment, coping with natural changes, and so on. It's clear that he had to experiment at times, trying to catch images that may seem so timeless, yet they can look quite different at different times of day and under changing conditions.

Among my favorite photographs are the "misty morning picture" on p. 18, with trees reflecting on the water but interrupted by occasional ripples; the pic on p. 45 showing some "African Americans dance", a blurry and active photo taken from the back so that no faces are visible, and their raised arms dominate. Page 61 "early morning wind prints on desert sand" has fantastic contrast; on p. 78 we see a photo of a person blowing a ram's horn (shofar) in silhouette, against a sheet that distorts the faceless person; and the gorgeous picture on p. 186, showing a "full moon over the pyramids" is memorable, with its grainy hues of purple and indigo.

**Sacred Nile** is a marvelous photography book that will inspire you and teach you. You will enjoy it and be humbled by it as well.