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Wasp or hippopotamus?

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To the Editor:

In regard to the cover art depicting the first recorded description of a fatal anaphylactic response in 2641 BC by Pharaoh Menes to wasp sting (2000, volume 105, number 1, part 1), I would like to pass along these additional citations if they are not already widely known. Although I have seen multiple references to this wasp-induced occurrence, there is a contrary view that the death of Pharaoh Menes may have actually been caused by a hippopotamus. Cohen¹ points out an earlier reference in Chafee² where “the Egyptian word for hippo was the same value as a word for wasp,” that one Egyptologist “did not distinguish between the word for hippo and the name of an Egyptian town with a similar sound which had as a determinative sign a wasp or bee,” a separate historical reference implicates the vertebrate assassin, and there is conjecture that “Menes” may have referred to more than one king, which further muddies interpretation. And, of course, hippopotamus-induced death is more likely through gross bodily trauma than from anaphylaxis. Although it would require an Egyptologist (or several) to shed more light on the validity of Chafee’s disparaging claim, I thought that your audience would at least be interested in knowing of this alternate interpretation to the oft-referenced tale.

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Richard S. Vetter, MS

Department of Entomology, University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA 92521

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