

Toby WILKINSON:

The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt: The History of a Civilisation from 3000 BC to Cleopatra

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As the title indicates, this recent book by renowned Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson¹ is a complete account of the history of ancient Egypt from its outset in prehistory to its demise upon its integration into the Roman Empire in 30 BCE. While the date 3000 BCE as a chronological point of reference to the beginning of Egyptian civilisation proper is acceptable (the author acknowledges in the first part of the book that the set of circumstances which enabled Egypt to become a unified state developed much earlier, at least since 5000 BCE), when one should place its end is debatable. Contrary to Toby Wilkinson, other authors regard Roman domination of Egypt as part of the history of ancient Egypt². But the author justifies his choice with the criterion of dynastic continuity maintained until the last Ptolemaic ruler (p. 39).

As it would be expected of a book of this sort, the author presents a systematised account of political developments, focusing on *e.g.*, the

¹ Other important books by this author are: *Early Dynastic Egypt* (New York, Routledge, 1999), and *Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt. The Palermo Stone and its Associated Fragments* (London – New York, Kegan Paul International, 2000). For reviews of these two volumes see Ikram, Salima, review of *Early Dynastic Egypt*, by Toby A. H. Wilkinson, *American Anthropologist* 103 (September 2001), p. 845, and Michel Baud, review of *Royal Annals of Ancient Egypt. The Palermo Stone and its Associated Fragments*, by Toby A. H. Wilkinson, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 57e Année, (May – June 2002), pp. 683-684, respectively.

² See *e.g.*, Peacock, David, “The Roman Period (30 BC–AD 395),” in Ian Shaw (ed.), *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 414-436.

royal ideology created to keep the population – particularly the ruling elite – from contesting the accumulation of so much power on only one individual; the sometimes peaceful and other times belligerent relations with Egypt's neighbours – especially Nubia, the cities of Syria-Palestine, the great empires of Mitanni, the Kingdom of the Hittites, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, and Rome –; the structure of the state administration, and the internecine conflicts within the Egyptian court and within the country itself – mainly during the intermediate periods. Apart from these political topics, the author also introduces and discusses other related topics including religious developments, such as the association of the non-royal elite with Osiris during the First Intermediate Period, and the living conditions of the different social strata. Regarding the latter topic, Toby Wilkinson is particularly sensible to the discrepancy between the ruling elite and the average Egyptian. The author elaborates on this social disparity especially in the beginning of chapter 18 where he discusses the living conditions of the peasantry and the hardships of corvée duty. On p. 365 Wilkinson makes an important observation which is valid not only to students of ancient Egypt but also to students of other human cultures: pharaonic civilisation was built by the toil of peasants. Certainly the monumental achievements which are still admirable today were due to the planning and genius of kings and their architects, but complex cultural investments require an economic system where the majority of the population sustains a literate elite, free from manual labour, which engages in those cultural enterprises.

This book is one more introduction to the Egyptian history, but it might differ from other volumes in one important aspect: at some points it morally appraises the history of ancient Egypt. As Toby Wilkinson states in the prologue, he intends to provide a more realistic account of Egyptian history exposing its darker side rather than focusing on its flashy achievements alone³. As the author also states in the prologue, he

³ The book by Pascal Vernus (trans. David Lorton), *Affairs and Scandals in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca – New York, Cornell University Press, 2003, shares a similar purpose.

has become increasingly uncomfortable with the study of ancient Egypt since instead of being a morally advanced civilisation concerned above all with everyone's well being, it was a country where the peasants and other workers of low social stratum were brutally repressed and made to work in unforgiving conditions in order to satisfy their masters' megalomania. Twenty years earlier John Baines wrote about this kind of discomfort that people might feel in relation to Egyptian society:

«[p]eople model their object of study to some extent after what they would like a society to be, or they react against that approach and say that society was brutal and repressive. The latter approach involves some rejection of what originally attracted people to their subject, and in intellectual – as against psychological – terms it is legitimized chiefly by placing Egypt in the wider context of other complex societies. Both views imply moral positions.»⁴

There are however instances where one is compelled to agree with Toby Wilkinson. Examples are: the condition of the skeletons of some of the workers of the pyramids of Giza which show that they sustained frequent injuries (as mentioned by Wilkinson on p. 86); the extremely high loss of life in gold-mining expeditions during the New Kingdom (pp. 367-368); and the humiliation and brutal repression meted out to rebels and foreign peoples (examples on pp. 257-258, 309-310, 381, and 423-424).

These features are characteristic not only of ancient Egypt, but also of other human societies including modern ones. However, applying our moral viewpoint to human cultures, especially ancient ones which cannot be inquired directly and which can only be known through extant sources, might inevitably lead to a narrow perception of those cultures. On the contrary, if one seeks to adopt the attitude suggested by the French historian Marc Bloch, of understanding instead of

⁴ Baines, John, "Restricted Knowledge Hierarchy and Decorum: Modern Perceptions and Ancient Institutions", *Journal of American Research Center in Egypt* 27 (1990), p. 5.

judging⁵, one might get a clearer and less biased insight into the dynamics of human societies. Nonetheless, Wilkinson's approach remains a valid wakeup call to alert scholars and non-specialists alike to not idealise their study subjects; one must simply beware of not falling into the opposite extreme.

Having briefly reviewed the subject matter of the book, let us now focus on its formal aspects. The book is composed of a chronology, five parts – each comprising several chapters – preceded by a prologue and succeeded by an epilogue, footnotes, further notes, bibliography, and an index.

The chronology presented at the beginning of the book is extremely useful. It dates not only the several dynasties and their kings, but also important events occurring in Egypt and in other parts of the world. Examples include the «rise of the Osiris Cult» during the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties (c. 2125-1775 BCE), and the «height of the Olmec civilisation in Mexico» during the reign of Nineteenth Dynasty King Horemheb (c. 1319-1292 BCE).

Each part of the book opens with a brief outline of what will be detailed and with a map of Egypt in the period under discussion (Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, *etc.*) which encompasses, when pertinent, other areas such as the Near East and the Aegean. Other more specific maps of cities and regions, such as Thebes and the Memphite necropolis, are provided in the relevant chapters. The subject matter of the book was summarised above and hence, in the opinion of the present reviewer, it would be redundant to detail here each part of the book.

Pictures are also included in the form of black and white and coloured photographs; black and white pictures occur alongside the text, whereas coloured photographs are provided in separate and unnumbered pages.

In what regards names of people and of places, the author has given preference to the forms closer to the original instead of its classical

⁵ Bloch, Marc, "Judging or Understanding?" in Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (translated by Peter Putnam), New York, Vintage Books, 1964 (1949 reprint), pp. 138-44.

forms. Thus Edfu, for example, is referred to as Djeba, and its classical form is presented only once on p. 70. This city is featured in the index, but only as Djeba making it difficult for a reader only acquainted with the classical form of the name to look it up. The same is true of names of people. The first reference to Nakhthorheb occurs on p. 39 and the second on p. 459. This Egyptian king is disclosed as being Nectanebo only on the first occurrence which creates a considerable hiatus between both occurrences; by the time a reader, who might be only familiarised with the form *Nectanebo*, reaches p. 459, he might have forgotten the original form of the name and, in this case, resorting to the index in order to return to p. 39 seems to be a practical solution. However, a concordance of names of places and people would have solved this potential hurdle to the non-specialist reader more conveniently. Nonetheless, the usage of Egyptian names will certainly contribute to forge future generations of students of ancient Egypt more acquainted with the source material.

In his description of Egyptian history, Toby Wilkinson often supports his interpretations with references to coeval texts and to modern discussions which benefits both the average reader as well as the scholar. While the cited Egyptian texts are referenced in the footnotes to each chapter, modern works are mentioned in the section «Further Notes» where the author presents bibliography – usually readable volumes, but occasionally also books and articles aimed at experts – to the several subjects presented in the corresponding chapters, as well as to divergent theories proposed by other authors. Different interpretations are often discussed in this section rather than in the main text.

The final bibliography is copious and conveniently divided into «Ancient Sources» and «Modern Works». The inclusion of a glossary would have been useful particularly to the non-Egyptologist reader. However, important concepts such as the *ba*, and the *ka*, and titles like «God's Wife of Amun» are explained in the text, and one way to circumvent the absence of a glossary is to resort once more to the index.

In sum, this book is a convenient introduction to the history of ancient Egypt, useful both to the average reader and to scholars from other fields within the social sciences such as Assyriology, Classical Studies, Biblical Studies, and Anthropology. Besides providing a valuable synthesis to the Egyptian history, it may also prompt the reader to question to what extent are persons from the past different from us and to what extent should we apply our standards to them.