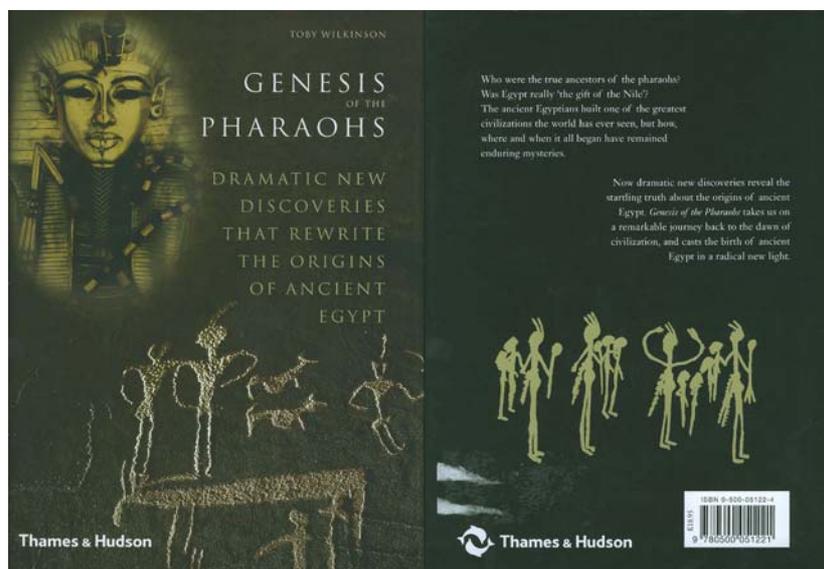


**Wilkinson, T. 2003. Genesis of the pharaohs. Dramatic new discoveries that rewrite the origins of ancient Egypt. – London, Thames & Hudson**

Book review by M. Campagno



It is well-known that the problem of Egypt's origins has received, and still receives, the attention of many researchers as well as that of the general public interested in ancient Egypt. Toby Wilkinson's book 'Genesis of the pharaohs. Dramatic new discoveries that rewrite the origins of ancient Egypt' seems to be destined to this second group. Otherwise, either the assertions on the 'dramatic' nature of the author's findings in the Eastern Desert or the need of 'rewriting' the Early Egyptian history would not be easy to understand. This initial remark does not imply any demerit of the book, but simply tries to put it into the context of general diffusion, in which Wilkinson's proposal proves to be particularly enjoyable.

'Genesis of the pharaohs' explores the rock drawings found in the proximities of Eastern Desert's wadis, especially those which seem to come from the Nagada I phase of the Predynastic Period (ca. 4000-3600 BC), and the main thesis of the book suggests that their authors, groups of semi-nomadic herders, were the direct ancestors of the later pharaonic civilization. To demonstrate his point of view, Wilkinson proposes a journey that starts from a description of those rock drawings, and continues with a series of considerations about problems concerning their dating, main motifs depicted, identity of the artists, daily life and beliefs of those early inhabitants of the Nile Valley and adjacent regions.

Chapter one ('The desert speaks') introduces the reader into the subject of Eastern Desert's rock art with a brief 'historiography' of the matter, and Wilkinson's own experiences of his two visits to the region. To do so, the various expeditions that documented the Eastern Desert during the last century are discussed, from the pioneer visits of Weigall (1907-1908) and Winkler (1936-1937) to the two author's travels, in 1999 and 2000. These last two are described in detail, both to indicate the re-discovering of sites previously documented in different wadis of the Abad and Hammamat systems, and to report the rock drawings discovered by Wilkinson and his team in their second visit to the wadis Barramiya and Umm Salam, mainly compatible with already known motifs (boats with human figures, hunting scenes, cattle, human beings carrying out diverse activities). The description of Eastern Desert's rock art is complemented with references to the present-day landscape, still inhabited by Bedouins and some of the animals represented in the petroglyphs, like gazelles and ibex. The style of the account, like a traveller's diary, is quite passionate, and Wilkinson openly shows his "fascination" with all things he sees (p. 41), even recalling one particular night during his visit, when he "fell in love" with the Eastern Desert (p. 45).

Chapter two ('The sands of time') introduces the problem of dating the rock art. After considering various difficulties of current methods and criteria suggested by some researchers, Wilkinson proposes to recognise the epoch of the petroglyphs, starting from an identification of the same motifs in other better dated contexts. Thus, he establishes a series of parallels between a wide group of Eastern Desert's rock drawings and diverse representations coming from the Nile Valley, mainly from Nagada I contexts. These parallels include hunting scenes (especially the harpooning of hippopotamus, provided with a strong ritual meaning), diverse wild animals (crocodiles, gazelles, but also giraffes and elephants, which testify that what is now a desert was a savannah in the past), different kind of ships (mainly square-hulled and sickle-shaped boats), as well as diverse

anthropomorphic figures, alternatively identified by the author as human beings or gods, equipped with maces and headdresses (including an object comparable to the later red crown). Given such a series of parallels, Wilkinson proposes that most of these motifs coming from the Eastern Desert have to be dated to the first half of the fourth millennium BC.

Chapter three ('Hunters and herders') goes deeper into these iconographic parallels, with the aim of determining the type of society which produced those motifs. On the one hand, some of the representations in the desert (elephants, crocodiles, boats) evoke a habitat related to the valley. On the other, some funerary goods of Nagada I graves in the valley (ostrich eggs, minerals, some iconography) suggest some knowledge of the eastern savannah. Therefore, Wilkinson suggests that both regions share the same cultural tradition. In fact, taking into account the apparently "seasonal" status of the settlements in the Nile Valley (p. 94) and the importance of cattle-herding indicated by testimonies coming from the valley and the desert, the author proposes that both regions were the habitat of one and the same group of small communities of semi-nomadic herders, that alternated the valley and the savannah according to their seasonal needs of grasslands for their cattle.

Chapter four ('Before the pharaohs') expands the former considerations about the lifestyle in the Predynastic Period and offers a general description of social practices of the epoch. Following the rhythm of seasons, cattle-herding appears in combination with agriculture and craftsmanship. From the perspective of social structure, the existence of small communities organised along tribal lines is proposed, presided over by village headmen. Beyond the semi-nomadism suggested by the author as the dominant socio-economic practice, the presence of larger permanent settlements is also indicated. These towns, such as Nekhen, Nubt and Tjeni, were established in strategic regions with an access to basic resources, and their leaders would then begin to accumulate wealth and political power. The chapter ends with the 'biography' of Sen, a fictional character that allows the reader to think on an individual life in that Predynastic world.

Chapter five ('Ships of the Desert') considers the reasons that might have compelled those inhabitants of Prehistoric Egypt to engrave all these motifs in the Eastern Desert rocks. According to Wilkinson, the purpose of the representations, as those of later Egyptian art, should have been magic or religious in nature, which tends to explain why major concentration of drawings used to be made in places of difficult access. The motifs themselves point in the same direction. The author distinguishes two main categories: animals- and boats-scenes. The first group suggests the idea of domination over the animal world (tethering cattle, hunting wild animals, assuming animal qualities, 'ordering' the chaos inherent in natural world through its graphic representation). The second group, in the light of later pharaonic representations, can be interpreted as barks for the gods, when big figures appear on ships, or, alternatively, as boats for the journey to the afterlife. The funerary sense of the latter could be reinforced by the concentration of boats in some sites, which could constitute revered places as "gateways to the next world" (p. 159).

Finally, chapter six ('Cradle of civilization') intends to re-think the origins of ancient Egyptians, taking into account the information considered in previous chapters. On the one hand, the author indicates that the semi-nomadic people of Nagada I, familiarised with both the valley and the Eastern savannah, had an immediate antecedent in the former Badarian people, whose lifestyle was also semi-nomadic, at least as from 5000 BC. On the other, Wilkinson considers that rock drawings provide the "missing link in the evolution of Ancient Egypt" (p. 187), since they reveal the origin of many elements of the art, religion and symbolism of later Egyptians. Thus, the researcher concludes that "the origins of pharaonic culture are to be found not in a settled agricultural lifestyle by the banks of the Nile, but in the challenges of a more precarious nomadic existence among the mountains and wadis to the east" (p. 195).

This last chapter perhaps reflects some oscillation between the statement that "at the heart of Ancient Egypt's origins and early development lies the demanding way of life followed by the Badarians and their successors [distinguished by] the annual movement from Nile Valley to savannah and back again" (p. 185) and, on the other hand, the categorical assertion that "the origins of Ancient Egypt lie in the Eastern Desert" (p. 197). While the second of these affirmations coincides more with the desire of communicating the importance of the rock drawings registered there, the first one, the one that suggests the existence of one and the same culture living in the valley and in the adjacent savannah, seems more compatible with the information offered throughout this book.

In a more specific level, some rock drawings' interpretations seem rather hasty (a character with seven vertical strokes on his head is interpreted as a shaman in a state of trance, p. 137) or somewhat inconsistent (largest figures are identified, as anthropomorphic divinities p. 189, and, as a father with his child p. 107). Other interpretations, on the other hand, are highly attractive from an anthropological point of view, such as the suggestion about the sites with concentration of petroglyphs as places of connection between the natural and supernatural worlds (p. 159), or the proposal about the rock drawings of the different sites as "territorial markers" for distinct communities, so that each of them could periodically return to their own places in the Eastern savannah (p. 160).

Gifted with a pleasant style and with a great amount of illustrations and colour plates, 'Genesis of the pharaohs' constitutes a work that has the relevant merit of bringing a not very widespread aspect of the prehistory of ancient Egypt within the reach of the general public. The analyses of that epoch, as the author affirms, have been mainly centred, perhaps excessively, on the evidences of the Nile Valley and Delta, overlooking the probably more silent but nonetheless significant testimonies of the deserts.

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