



Genesis of the Pharaohs: Dramatic New Discoveries Rewrite the Origins of Ancient Egypt

By Toby Wilkinson

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Dramatic new discoveries rewrite the origins of ancient Egypt.

For generations, tourists, scholars, and armchair travelers have been intrigued by the puzzle of the ancient Egyptians' origins. Was civilization brought to the Nile Valley by invaders from other lands, even refugees from Atlantis? Or did civilization develop, over a long period, within Egypt itself? Most archaeologists favor the latter theory, yet nagging doubts have always remained because many of ancient Egypt's most distinctive elements seem to have appeared quite suddenly, as if from nowhere.

Now the quest for the elusive "missing link" is finally over, and, in the light of dramatic new discoveries, the genesis of the pharaohs is coming into focus. Ancient Egypt, it seems, did not begin by the banks of the Nile but in a much harsher environment. The ancestors of the pyramid-builders were not village-dwelling farmers but wandering cattle-herders, and pharaonic civilization was forged in a remote region, one of the most forbidding places on earth. These are the startling conclusions of Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson, based on his own discoveries in the heart of the Eastern Desert, between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Here, the pharaohs' distant ancestors left a stunning legacy that has remained hidden for 6,000 years: hundreds of intricate rock carvings that tell us about their lifestyle and their deepest beliefs. Pharaonic imagery such as the afterlife journey by boat, royal hunting, and the iconography of gods and kings all find their origins in this inhospitable terrain.

Genesis of the Pharaohs traces the discovery of these ancient records, dates them, and identifies the artists who made them. As the story unfolds, we travel back in time to a remarkable early period of human creativity and discover the answer to the question of where, when, and how ancient Egypt began. 88 illustrations, 25 in color

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Modern scholars have tended to accept that the brilliant civilization of the pharaohs is the product of the rich agricultural surpluses of the Nile floodplain. But ancient rock carvings tell a different story, according to this illustrated treatise on ancient Egypt. Archaeologist Wilkinson specializes in rock art in the region between the Nile and the Red Sea dating from the 5th millennium B. C., when this now-desert area was verdant grassland. These pre-Pharaonic carvings, he argues, are a complex mixture of motifs, depicting crocodiles, hippos and boats from the Nile alongside ostriches and giraffes from the savannah, and suffused with cattle imagery and the religious symbolism that would characterize classical Egyptian art. This evidence, he asserts, shows that pre-Pharaonic Egyptians were not settled flood-plain farmers, but semi-nomadic herders who drove their cattle in between the lush riverbanks and the drier grasslands—a legacy evident, for example, in the Egyptian royal sceptre, which looks like a shepherd's crook. Wilkinson argues for Egyptian civilization's deep roots in a distinctive African landscape. His theory tacitly challenges an orthodoxy that holds that civilization sprang from efforts to irrigate land around the great rivers of Egypt, Mesopotamia and China; "cultural complexity," he writes, "was not borne of an easy agricultural lifestyle by the banks of the river, but of the fight for survival in more difficult terrain." Wilkinson wears his erudition lightly and provides an engaging and clearly written guide to the arcana of pre-historic Egyptology. His book is an invigorating contribution to a vital historiographical debate. 87 illustrations, 25 in color.

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Review

Well-researched and logical. -- *Library Journal*, Edward K. Werner, 1 June 2003

About the Author

Toby Wilkinson holds a doctorate in Egyptology from the University of Cambridge where he is a Fellow of Clare College. He lectures widely on ancient Egypt and has extensive experience of the archaeological sites in the Nile Valley and Egyptian deserts.

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