WRITING ANCIENT EGYPT



I have just received a copy of Toby Wilkinson's *Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*. The cover endorsements are enthusiastic; the blurb is packed with hyperbole and the promise of a roller-coaster soap-opera of pomp and ceremony, corruption and decadence, rulers with all-too-recognizable human emotions, in a book that will, we are told, become the standard source on the civilization that lasted longer than any other.

The text is nearly 500 pages long and full of detail, backed by a long guide to further reading. The story is indeed all-too-familiar and rather melodramatic: powerful rulers lording their way through history, plotting and scheming, indulging their whims and desires, against a background of threat, oppression and poverty.



Amenhotep III wearing the khepresh, or Blue Crown, New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty 1391-1353 BCE

This last weekend I posted a comment on the exhibition of Olmec art at the de Young

in San Francisco – [Link] In contrast to the extraordinary things on display, I find fault with their presentation as “ART”, when that notion is embedded in a very elitist set of practices and institutions that serve the interests not of humanity in general, but of commodified contemporary cultural property in the hands of a few. I am disappointed when I witness academic colleagues acting as gatekeepers to this world of ART, offering what seems like transparent description and account, in labels and catalogues, when actually that very language is shutting down options, telling you what you are seeing, indicating how authorities write about the past and other societies, about creativity and making, and therefore how the educated, but non-expert, viewer should see and talk. My point, one that I feel the need to regularly reassert, is that we may miss the opportunity to learn about ourselves and others, when the story of history is presented as basically already known, only requiring repetition and transmission to new generations by knowledgeable experts.

In the de Young exhibition the story was that of the artistic creativity of an ancient civilization – a universal story of rare human talent. Nevertheless, much on show was quite strange, and witnessed a very fragmentary record of Olmec times. In spite of my criticism of the simple frame applied to Olmec art in the exhibition, the things broke that frame – there was a tension between the familiarity of the human and animal physiognomy of the figurative art, the expressions, the postures, the props and accoutrement of power and divinity, and the sense that there was a lot more going on that we had little access to (and, not least, because the archaeologists and art historians were reluctant to take us there.)

Let me say a little more about this tension.



Tomb of Khnemomosi, Eighteenth Dynasty, c1370 BCE

Toby Wilkinson's account of three thousand years of ancient Egypt is a universal story of the rise and fall of infamy, power and aggrandized kings.

Ancient Egypt has too often been portrayed as exotic, a distant and strange world obsessed with opulence and death. Toby Wilkinson would have us believe that it was far more familiar, and in a rather wearisome way – his imbroglio of political struggles that reads like a political history of the last hundred years, where the rule of the notorious and "heretical" pharaoh Amenhotep IV, Akhenaten, can be likened to that of North Korea today. I can find no strangeness in his story at all.

The clear scholarly language of the Olmec exhibition catalogue and labels is quite precise and descriptive, but stops short of a strong narrative frame, other than that of archaeologists discovering stuff in Mexico and arguing about it. Wilkinson's formulaic narrative is delivered, very successfully, in chatty and journalistic prose, definitive ("this is the way it happened"), few ifs or buts. It is in that style so familiar from the narrative non-fiction of the contemporary book trade and media industries today. This is no doubt because his editor at Random House has an eye on the market.

I think we are here looking at a failure of the archaeological imagination

It is, I believe, a failure of scholarship to impose the present on the past, to find our own reflection in the rich experiences of others living in different societies. Yes, we do have to translate ancient worlds into terms we understand, but that also forces us to question our own terms of understanding. This is the *actuality* of archaeology – the way that both past and present change when they are brought together in something like an archaeological encounter. The best accounts are those that let both past and present be what they are as they also offer new insights into the past and into the way we look at our own potential and future.

This also involves witnessing loss, that the past is left in pieces (was it ever a coherent whole?) by refusing a definitive account. The challenge is to weave together loss and reparation, fragments and filling the gaps with account and narrative – exploring the constant tensions between the familiar and the strange.

It is not really appropriate for me to compare Toby Wilkinson's book with Jan Assmann's cultural history *The Mind of Egypt*. Assmann's book is an academic monograph, though it has appealed to a wider audience. But it does interweave the familiar and strange in the way I have described, avoiding easy formulae and stock narrative, offering a translation of the remains of a lost world, its metamorphosis under the never-ending challenge we all face to watch and listen carefully, as we make sense of the rich and different human experiences of others.