EGYPT

Review by Bettany Hughes

Egypt is frequently labelled mysterious. In fact it is the opposite. Mysteria – in the original Greek - means things not to be spoken of, but Egypt has for the last 4,000 years been much vaunted, much debated. Both Joyce Tyldesley's *Myths & Legends of Ancient Egypt* and Toby Wilkinson's *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* add impressively to this tradition. Each, book in its own way, deals with the march of time through Egyptian lands and through the human idea itself.

Both also cover precisely the same period 3 000BC – 30BC: from the outset of pharaonic power to its abrupt end. These are ambitious undertakings – Egypt's unique topography encouraged the generation of an extraordinary civilization and Egyptian sands its unusually excellent preservation. There is a lot of material to sift through. Tyldesley, by forensically analyzing the myths and therefore the beliefs of the ancient population endeavours to get under the skin of Egyptian life, and thereby meets the unsung characters of Egyptian history – run-of-the-mill Egyptian women for instance. Wilkinson's job is to investigate statecraft and political power-play, and to trace the development of an Egyptian idea – what he sees as the first example of nation-building - as it is born, flourishes and then sows the seeds of its own destruction. Not just seduced by the gold and the glamour (although game enough to bring this aspect of Egyptian culture vividly to life) Wilkinson's mission is to illuminate 'the darker side of pharaonic living'.

Tyldesley's account is upfront about the difficulties of such tasks. The stories she recounts, she reminds us, derive from over 150 generations of humanity in a time when each generation could potentially worship at least 1500 different gods. Not only that but the characters and tales themselves were fluid, morphing through time and from region to region. It can be hard to keep track of human-headed, brick-shaped goddesses who evolve into cats and the god who 'performs a shoulder-stand while sucking his own penis', thereby turning his mouth into a womb. But other befuddling myth-stories are more immediately clarified. She skilfully explains why the pyramids came into existence (early royal graves represented the life-giving 'mounds' of fertile mud left behind after the Nile had flooded every year). And her key question – which came first, the myth or the cult; the stories we tell to make sense of our world or the ways, physically we try to understand and ameliorate it: gets to the heart of both historiography and human behaviour.

Making up stories about the strange magical world they found themselves in was *the* live art form of Ancient Egypt – no taste for Olympic games or bread and circuses here. And so we have to imagine the complicated narratives that Tyldesley meticulously traces animated by an Egyptian twilight, olive oil torches, date-palm-wine or the glorious sensuality of the half-dressed, lotus-sweet dancing girls on tomb-walls, adoring the cow-headed fertility goddess Hathor.

Women and goddesses play a starring role in this book. Quite right. The proliferation of female deities and spirits; the story-book characters of the female-king Hatshepsut; the vociferous Nefertiti and the protecting, physically supportive body-language of women on wall-paintings, temple doors and cheap-as-chips earthenware pots all make it clear that the women of Egypt were both valued and potent. Tyldesley reminds us that Egyptian women and men were equal under the law. Mind you when describing evidence of one couple's infidelity, we hear that the mob charged to the woman's house (not the male adulterer's) 'to

beat her, together with her people.' Whatever the law might say, prejudice has long been minded to *cherchez la femme*, and Ancient Egypt was no exception.

Even though Wilkinson's job is to paint the big picture as oppose to Tyldesley's intimate, fine-drawn descriptions, women appear as 3D characters here too. We learn how potent Nefertiti is when her husband denies her power; 'Nor shall the King's Great Wife say to me, 'Look there is a good place for Akhetaten elsewhere' nor shall I listen to her…' (this was a woman remember, who is portrayed on temple carvings smiting bound captives). His fascination with Egypt's evolving theatres of power is acute. After a typical display of grandstanding, when Pharaoh Akhenaten, Nefertiti and their six princesses sat under sunshades and watched a parade of exotic gifts respectfully offered by sweltering and scorched foreign dignitaries, the King of Assyria thundered, 'Why should (my) messengers be made to stay constantly out in the sun and die under the sun's rays?' What a treat to be brought face to face with the Bronze Age petulance of rival heads of state. The miracle of source preservation in Egypt is such that a confident historian like Wilkinson enjoys rich pickings.

Both authors pack their pages with the benefits of new archaeology. Wilkinson's opening chapter highlights incredible new discoveries from the Egyptian Stone Age. Bone tags on the grave goods of a leader from around 5000BC show that early on the Egyptians demonstrated a particular taste for bureaucracy and for mankind's desire to own that which once belonged to others. So the beginning of *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt* finds a painfully neat echo in its finale when in 30BC Rome finally defeats pharaonic power and acquires Egyptian lands. Tyldesley too talks animatedly about the recent archaeological evidence that proves the pyramids were built not by slaves, but by loyal, native workers. Both authors have a relaxed writing-style – it is as though you have lucked out in down-town Cairo and your hour-long wait in that traffic-jam is relieved by the intelligent and highly informed passenger you find yourself sharing your taxi with. Both authors are also touchingly, infectiously honest about their delight in their subject. Wilkinson starts his book wandering, eagerly through the Cairo Museum, while Tyldesley ends hers thanking the Professor who fired her interest in the Egyptian enigma all those years back in a chilly lecture hall.

Travelling between hot and heady Egypt and our cooler climes always reminds me why we are drawn so ineluctably to this distant landscape. There is a moment just before the sun rises in Southern Egypt when time seems an irrelevance. The 'Red Land' of the desert sands and the 'Black Land' - the fertile hinterland of the river itself, appear entirely comfortable with their legendary antiquity; the modern world a superficial irrelevance. As both authors agree, wondering at the unlikely fecundity and its harsh, barren backdrop is not indulgent, modern romanticism, but something fundamental to what it was to be an Ancient Egyptian. The Egyptians realized their country was, simply, special and they developed both a myth-system and a political-system to maintain and to promote their great, 'god-given' fortune.

Bettany Hughes' new book on Socrates and her new television programme investigating Nefertiti will come out later this autumn.