

The Archaeology of Early Egypt: Social Transformations in North-East Africa, 10,000 to 2650 BC

By David Wengrow

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The reproduction, and thereby evolution, of culture is a fluid concept whose conceptualisation is reflected in the different investigative methodologies being deployed within Africanist archaeology today. Despite problems in its theoretical and practical application, particularly reflecting disciplinary interests in 'otherness' (Keesing 1994), culture is regarded as an evolutionary process and can be broadly defined as:

a cumulative inheritance system allowing members of a group to incorporate behavioural features not only with a positive biological value, but sometimes also with a neutral, or even negative, biological value (Castro and Toro 2004: 10235).

Culture is thereby underwritten by a shared value system rooted in symbolic learning. Through the possession of shared value systems and the variability in enculturation norms, the potential exists for confusing social customs and law, differing degrees of social control, and cultural versus political structures of societies. Cultural structures, a higher abstraction level resting upon social organisational principles, are inherently vested with the trappings of symbolism. In particular, power symbolism has been defined as "a complex of thoughts, rules and goals of a social group" (Skalnik 1996: 86). To the degree by which symbols of power are co-opted towards political ends, political ideology manifests itself as a "specific set of thoughts and rules regulating the co-existence of people on one territory" (Skalnik 1996: 86).

These are some of the principle issues outlined and explored in Wengrow's detailed and authoritative publication, *The Archaeology of Early Egypt: Social Transformations in North-East Africa, 10,000–2650 BC*. It forms part of the *Cambridge World Archaeology* series, edited by Yoffee, which seeks to understand and portray broad cultural trends and the regional implications thereof for cross-cultural interpretations; the authors in the series are expected to entwine anthropological, archaeological and, where possible, historical expertise.

Fieldwork conducted amongst the Moors and Tuaregs of the Sahara and Sahel (Bonte 1977), the Dii of Cameroon (Muller 1996) and the Nanumba polity in northern Ghana (Skalnik 1996), amongst others, has reinforced the notion of recognition of multiple forms of political organisation within an African context. Although Wengrow fails to draw examples from a wider African context, he draws upon past constructions of the notion of prehistory in North-East Africa and the Near East, which are his areas of speciality, to convincingly argue that: 1) Neolithic social forms were more diverse than previously reconstructed; and 2) there are continuities between Neolithic and Dynastic modes of embodiment and engagement.

These arguments are divided into two parts. Part One is entitled "Transformations in prehistory" and consists of five chapters; Part Two focuses on "The making of kinship" and covers the remaining six chapters. The book is also wonderfully illustrated throughout with maps showing the intra- and inter-site localities, the spread of farming, the distribution of raw materials and examples of material culture. The lack of colour illustrations, which would have enhanced points made about figurines and ceramic wares, can probably be put down to editorial guidelines or production costs.

Part One briefly describes the history of archaeological thought in the Near East, African Nile Valley and adjacent deserts, emphasising material practices constituting and transforming social experience and practices in the interaction between the living and dead. Domestic animals are, for example, present in Egypt prior to the advent of farming practices. The spread of farming, the incorporation of agricultural products within domestic, socio-economic and political spheres, and the ways in which acceleration in changing networking patterns are manifested in

the material record are not only described but actively enveloped within a framework of examining the social networks of engagement.

Chapters Four and Five look at the early to mid fourth millennium BC and how funerary practices were changing. Wengrow notes the shift from earlier cultural similarities in burial profiles between Upper Egypt and Lower Sudan to increasing differentiation as social groups in the Middle Nile began exerting control over trade routes, events which are reflected by increased numbers of prestige goods found in cemeteries. The differentiation is expressed through objects of mobility and objects deliberately taken out of circulation. This is the point where Wengrow really begins to apply body theory as identity and ideology are reconstructed through, and situated within, a focus on the cemeteries and other ritual grounds.

Wengrow does not ignore the functional aspects of material changes. Rather he hypothesises that the select items have their origins in ceremonial practices; for example, transformations in the consumption of leavened bread and beer not only represent new uses for coarse containers but are also appropriated by emerging elites who visibly legitimise their control through objects incorporated into their burial rites.

Part Two examines the forms of social power and dismemberment involved in the establishment of kinship. In doing so, Wengrow returns to the theme of his first chapter and places the Late Predynastic within the wider sphere of regional interaction, particularly with the Near East, as summarised on page 134:

I seek to show how 'monarchic memory' in early Egypt was not an arbitrary fiction, but drew many of its conventional forms and practices from...the unspoken archive of social memory... We [cannot] any longer make do with an amorphous and teleological prehistory of half-legible symbols waiting to be given definition by the stamp of written history.

Underpinning this theme is Wengrow's contention that categorising the solidification of social structures in the Nagada III period as late in a continuum between simple and complex societies disguises the

way in which communities embody and portray their cultures and heritage in particular contexts. He links the increase of ceremonial objects in graves (flint knives with ivory handles, cosmetic palettes, maceheads and displays of writing) with the appropriation and centralisation of ritual knowledge and power in the hands of elites. As such, the boundary which is conventionally drawn between Predynastic and Dynastic Egypt is an artificial divide, to Wengrow, which masks a geographical locality in a state of constant social flux and evolution. The relationships between mortuary contexts and ideological power, between the elites and their dependents, and even between the different cemeteries continued to evolve right through both the Predynastic and Dynastic periods, with death structuring the world of the living and serving as the embodiment of socio-economic and political reproduction.

Criticisms of the work are hard to make and much ultimately depends upon the reader's theoretical perspective. Implicit criticisms of the title and the structure of argumentation (Stevenson 2006, Tristant 2007) miss an important point: body and social theory are crucial elements in examining social structures and ways in which societies and individuals chose to display messages of power, ritual and even defiance. Archaeology requires a continual engagement with the sociological and anthropological literatures to avoid losing out on the valuable insights which such studies provide.

Wengrow's initial argument regarding early Naqada mobility would have been strengthened by a fuller examination of the recently published French excavations at El Adaiima (Midant-Reynes 2003). My main criticism, however, is Wengrow's failure to engage more widely with the anthropological and sociological literature (e.g. Rautman 2000, Soafer 2006, Turner 1996) on embodiment, in this particular publication. Ultimately, however, this is a publication which moves beyond recent introductory textbooks (e.g. Bard 2007) that fail to actively incorporate embodiment, and which engages with the material records using a truly multi-disciplinary methodology which does justice to the aims of the series. The publication deserves to take its rightful place amongst the latest seminal works produced on early Egypt.

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