

The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt – The History of a Civilisation from 3000BC
to Cleopatra by Toby Wilkinson.
Bloomsbury Publishing 2010.

The enduring influence of ancient Egypt on modern history and culture and the fascination of many with it are beyond question, and the hunger for books on all aspects of the Pharaonic period remains undiminished, even if these days fresh discoveries by archaeologists are fewer and further between.

The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt does exactly what it says on the cover, presenting a crisp, detailed history of the Pharaonic period from its tentative beginnings to its mid-period glories to its ending with the relative ignominy of the Ptolemies and the capture of the land by Rome.

The book is divided into five sections, with a prologue and epilogue, covering a time from 5000 to 30 BC; Divine Right, End of Innocence, The Power and the Glory, Military Might and Change and Decay. Wilkinson, a renowned Egyptologist and Fellow of Clare College Cambridge, is not just interested in Pharaohs, their great building projects, their monumental tombs and military campaigns, though he covers them all, but also in the ordinary people and those who worked for the various royal houses. Some of the most intriguing material focuses on the religion of Ancient Egypt, the economy and the administration of the country.

At the heart of the book is the section on the 18th dynasty, probably the greatest of all the Pharaonic dynasties, among whom are some of the best known Pharaohs such as Amenhotep the first and third, Hatshepsut, Akhenaten and Tutankhamun, and during the time of which Egypt's power and influence spread wider than ever, the valley of the kings was inaugurated, and some magnificent palaces and temples were built.

The final millennium was a pale shadow of former glories, with foreign rulers, lack of political influence, and military weakness, concluding with a murderous and corrupt dynasty descended from one of Alexander the Great's generals, Ptolemy.

The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt is a wonderful resource text for anyone fascinated by the subject, beautifully illustrated, easy to read from start to finish or to dip into, with copious notes and an excellent bibliography. There is also a good timeline at the start of the book tracing contemporaneous developments inside and outside Egypt.

Over the years I have read many books about ancient Egypt, both general overviews and those looking at specific subject areas, this is certainly one of the best in the former category that I have yet read.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh