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**The Archaeology of Early Egypt:  
Social Transformations in North-East Africa, c.10,000 to 2,650 BC, by David Wengrow  
Cambridge University Press 2006, £50 (HB) £22.99 (PB), pp 366, 48 line diagrams 35  
half-tone illustrations, 7 maps. ISBN 0521835860 (HB), ISBN 0521543746 (PB)**

Reviewed by Steven Gregory

*University of Birmingham*

Perhaps you can judge a book by its cover, the quality of which certainly reflects the high standards of presentation maintained throughout *The Archaeology of Egypt*, an edition in the Cambridge World Archaeology series. The bold image of an elaborately decorated ‘ceremonial’ cosmetic palette certainly brings to mind the emergence of the dynastic state in ancient Egypt (see Cambridge University Press website for illustration<sup>1</sup>). The palette genre includes (in Wengrow’s words) ‘one of the best known artefacts of the ancient world’ (p. 41), the ‘Narmer Palette’, the inscriptions upon which have come to symbolize traditions of kingship and state power in dynastic Egypt, imagery which was to underpin Pharaonic rule for some three millennia. Yet, on closer inspection, the palette is not the ‘Narmer’ but an earlier example: the ‘Oxford’ or ‘Two Dogs’ palette. This artefact lacks the ordered appearance of the ‘Narmer’ instead portraying a confusion of wild animals perhaps representative of the more uncertain times in which the Egyptian state was formed. Some of the motifs are indicative of foreign influences, making the ‘Two Dogs’ palette a more appropriate symbol of those influences pervading the cultural cauldron in which ancient Egyptian kingship, one of the key themes of the book, was brewed.

The promise of an in-depth study of these cross-cultural stimuli is further implied by the broad spectrum of scholarship cited in the extensive reference section, which extends to some 49 pages. The book itself fulfils all such early expectations.

Use of the first person narrative style in the introduction comfortably invites the reader into the core of the subject, the complex matter of historical and archaeological philosophies which have informed earlier studies. Wengrow then sets out his own methodological

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521543743>

approach which encapsulates a degree of structuralist thought, and which relies much on a school of thought earlier propounded by Henri Frankfort, the aim of the book being to demonstrate the validity of the viewpoint that ‘hierarchy is a socially constructed, rather than a natural, feature of the Middle East’s historical landscape’ (p. 5). This task is achieved by elucidation of the available evidence in order to provide ‘a sustained interpretation of social and cultural change in Egypt and neighbouring parts of Africa and Asia, spanning a period of more than seven millennia between the onset of the Holocene and the early centuries of dynastic rule that preceded the Old Kingdom’ (p. 5). In reaching this goal Wengrow relies upon two principal areas of investigation: ‘the adoption of domesticated animals and plants during the fifth millennium’ (p. 8) and the subsequent ‘establishment of a unified territorial state under the centralised rule of a sacred monarch’ (p. 8).

The following chapters are divided into two parts, the first of which begins by setting the scene of the Nilotic environment with regard to changes in climate and landscape leading to ecological diversification and the constitution and maintenance of social boundaries, with particular attention to the introduction and spread of farming practices (pp. 14-30). From the examination of the archaeological evidence, Wengrow then seeks to establish the social foundations upon which the early Egyptian state was built and, in so doing, challenges many preconceptions regarding mobile communities and innovation in Neolithic societies. In particular he calls into question the view that mobile pastoral societies were necessarily marginal to mainstream cultural development, further arguing that, for the Nile Valley at least, it is the funerary rather than the domestic context which provides the window into the nature of society; the bodies of people and animals, not the house, providing the framework upon which social experience of Neolithic pastoral cultures may be configured (pp. 31-71). Wengrow expands his theory by discussing aspects of funerary culture which develop in the late Neolithic Period and which influence the ideology of kingship into the Pharaonic Period (pp. 72-98); here he emphasizes the relevance of trade in prestige goods and technologies associated with funerary gifts as evident in graves from sites throughout Egypt in the Naqada I - II Period.

In Part II Wengrow begins by examining the temporal and spatial aspects of kingship, and the perception of that office in Egyptian historiography – particularly historical distortion as influenced by adherence to Manethonic tradition – before describing patterns of both terrestrial and maritime trade between Egypt and neighbouring states (pp. 135-150), which

were focussed on the high status goods desired by the controlling elite groups. He concludes that the evolution of such large-scale networks ultimately created an ‘increasingly polarized society ... centred upon the royal court’ (p. 142), a process resulting in the reorganization of rural production whereby the ‘horizontal social networks’ of earlier Neolithic economies were transformed into hierarchical relationships, a hierarchy ‘defined and experienced in cosmological terms and made manifest through centrally organised ceremony and ritual’ (p. 146).

The book examines the evidence from the material culture which attests to both change and continuity as these social transformations evolve, with particular emphasis on the rising artistic repertoire which encapsulates earlier social tradition while proclaiming the emergent hierarchical elite as a necessary ‘feature of human existence’ (p. 175). The author draws widely from associated disciplines, including anthropological studies relating to cultures extant in the modern world, to bring a holistic approach to the work from which it becomes apparent that the relationship between the body of the mortal king and the eternal office of kingship is fundamental to the study of ancient Egyptian culture at all periods (pp. 257-269).

While informative and enjoyable to read from cover to cover, the structure, with each chapter divided into numbered and headed sub-sections, together with the frequent written ‘signposts’ to related matters, in-text references and appropriate and informative footnotes, make this book a useful aid to study. In addition, it includes a number of appendices, providing tabulated information regarding relative ceramic chronologies and cultural sequences, and the work benefits from a comprehensive index. Maps and illustrations are of an excellent quality and are well placed to add suitable graphic support to the text. Here a minor complaint is that there are occasions when toponyms highlighted in the text are not shown on the relevant map – a perennial cause of mild irritation – but this is of minor inconvenience! Overall the book constitutes a reference work which will be invaluable to both scholars and students of ancient Egyptian history and archaeology. The lack of unnecessary jargon, together with occasional explanation accompanying more unusual terms – e.g. *geziras* = raised ground, ‘turtle-backs’; caliciform = ‘tulip-shaped’; *zariba* = animal enclosures – also make the work attractive to the wider audience.

Perhaps the true value of this book is that it removes the modern myth that the political unification of ‘the Two Lands’ marked the birth of ‘eternal Egypt’; it rather describes the

gradual emergence of a state which remained constantly in formation. While much of the evidence discussed is well known, Wengrow offers a substantially different interpretation and, by considering the psychological and philosophical aspects which underlie processes of social and political change, convincingly infers abstract concepts from the tangible remains so as to offer a wider perspective on the period of transition from Neolithic to Dynastic Periods. As such, *The Archaeology of Egypt* constitutes a substantial, and extremely well written, contribution to the study of state formation in Egypt, and provides a template which will aid the study of social, economic, and political history in general.