**Introduction**

Ancient Egyptian civilization has always been of a great interest not only to historians and archeologists but also to general public at large. It fascinates us with its luxurious artefacts, intrigues with its hidden tombs, and allures with its sophisticated hieroglyphic writings. The book ‘The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt’ is about aspects of Ancient Egypt that led to its prosperity and also about causes of its fall. The book is written by an acknowledged specialist in Ancient Egyptian culture Toby Wilkinson and was published in New York by Random House publishing group in 2010.

The book covers a time frame of Egyptian history from 3000 BC and the emergence of Old Kingdom to the end of Ptolemaic Era (30 BC) and depicts the ruling of 31 dynasties of Egyptian kings. The book consists of Introduction, 5 Parts and epilogue which cover the periods of Old, Middle, and New Kingdom, Lybian, Assyrian and Persian invasion, ruling of Alexander the Great and Ptolemaic dynasty.  The book ends at the point when Rome conquers Egypt which is considered the end of Ancient Egypt history.

The book by Toby Wilkinson is written in the form of narrative with detailed descriptions and preciseness of dates of events. The author sometimes gets emotional in describing artefacts to invigorate the story and brighten up a reader’s imagination. Hence, he uses many descriptive adjectives and alternates the narrator of the story from first person to the third. Wilkinson also incorporates historical names close to their original sound, maps and other illustrations and charts. This gives the story a sense of authenticity.

The book starts with an introduction depicting the story of Tutankhamun tomb excavation by famous English Egyptologist Howard Carter and his companions. In November 1922 they made as Wilkinson puts it ‘the greatest archeological discovery the world had ever seen’. The reason the author starts with this story is to show how this discovery influenced him as a young boy and enhanced his admiration of Ancient Egyptian civilization. However, as he continued to learn the subject he discovered that there is another side to the beauty and mystics of Egypt. This other side being ‘political propaganda, an ideology of xenophobia, close surveillance of the population, and brutal repression of dissent. Thus, the aim of the book it to give all-rounded understanding of life in Ancient Egypt which will show despotism and brutality of authority in addition to marvels of ancient world. In the introduction the author also implies that methods which pharaohs used to gain obedience of their population such as despotism, brutality and summary executions can and are still used today to control and subjugate people. Thus, everybody can find lessons for themselves in this book.

**Part I** of the book illustrates the principles of Old Kingdom (2575 BC – 2125 BC), how it emerged, rose and, consequently came to an end as did all Egyptian dynasties.  However, the author starts way back before the first king of First Dynasty. He explains the geographical conditions that made the appearance of civilization possible and the circumstances of unification of Egypt into a monarchy under one king Narmer.  With the unification of different cities - Tjeni, Nubt, Nekhen - appeared the world’s  first country with its single monarch. This fact alone shows that Egyptian civilization was much more complex and developed than we imagine.

This period is also called the Pyramid era as it was the time when grandiose architecture became a symbol of king’s power and divinity. One of the most well-known architectural structures appeared during this time. These include Pyramids of Giza plateau, the Great Sphinx and other sun temples that often shape an image of Ancient Egypt in general public.

This magnificent architecture was the expression of Egyptians traditions and their perception of the world. The defining principle of this period was the belief that pharaoh is the son of God and, thus, his power is divine and his ruling is unconditional. During this era the authorities have stimulated this belief so vigorously that it was not doubted by population of Egypt for another 3 thousand years. Thus, political and religious branches of power were interdependent and basically inseparable. The principle of divine nature of pharaoh was expressed not only in architecture but in other arts as well – literature, sculpture, painting, theatrical life etc. Kings of that period were obsessed with showing their divine nature. That is why numerous royal ceremonies were held with lavishness and luxury .

As the main goal of the book is to show both sides of Ancient Egypt, the author describes the means of ruling during the Old Kingdom. The easiest way to subject the population is to make them fear the king. That is why ancient Egyptian king’s ruling was greatly characterized by neglect for human life, enslavement and exploitation of native population.  The rulers tried to demonstrate their difference from common population and thought little about lives of regular people. Moreover, the lives of authority were also fearful. When authoritative men died, their family and their servants were buried with them regardless of age in order to accompany them and serve them in their afterlife.  These burials are also proofs of greatly hierarchical society.

The unquestioned power of a ruler and his officials still had to be implemented by administrative actions. Egypt was characterized by command economy and a system of taxation which was possible due to invention of hieroglyphic writing. Although the country constantly enriched itself through vast international trade and conquests, the gap between rich and poor was enormous.

Transition from the second to the third dynasty was marked by re-unification of Egypt under strong ruling after its weakening by the kings of second dynasty. This was also a transition from prehistoric times of Egypt to its quintessence of pharaonic civilization. The first Step Pyramid designed by Imhotep was built to glorify the first king of the third dynasty Netjerikhet.

It was during the fourth dynasty, however, that the power of a monarch gained absolutism. ‘The Great Pyramid at Giza marks the zenith not just of ancient Egyptian kingship but of the universal tendency for absolute power to project itself in grandiose architecture’. The other side of this power was naturally poor conditions for slaves who built the pyramid as well as for closely situated population who sent all their cattle and crops to feed royal representatives.

Part I ends with the death of the last king of the Old Kingdom Pepi II who outlived all his heirs and destabilized both economic and political situation in the country.

**Part II** traces six centuries between the end of Old Kingdom and the beginning of New Kingdom – the Middle Kingdom. This was the time of golden age for Egypt when it stepped forward on the international arena by conquering all of its enemies and enhancing its trade ties with friendly states. It was also a time of thriving art, especially writing, which allowed for the appearance of Tale of Sinuhe, Prophecies of Neferti, Satire of the Trade and many others. Writing was also used in Old kingdom, but it was during the Middle Kingdom when it was not only used for administrative purposes but as a means to tell stories.

The beginning of Middle Kingdom was marked by succession of kings who did not stay on the throne for more than 1-2 years. This stopped with the ruling of Heracleopolis dynasty which held the throne for about a century and a half. However, their reign was characterized by negligence to basic administrative ruling which lead to trade interruption and famine around the country.

 As there was nobody to effectively govern the country province leaders emerged as a new political power. The strongest of them was Southern province of Thebes and its Theban dynasty. Young and ambitious ruler of Theban province Mentuhotep II aimed at defeating the Heracleopolis dynasty and unifying Egypt under one rule again. The civil war started. The ruler of Heracleopolis was defeated and a new period of reforms and stability started. Thebes became the capital city of pharaohs of Middle Kingdom.

Mentuhotep II started his ruling with the restoration of the belief in divine nature of the pharaoh. He also introduced a belief of glorious death for everybody and reincarnation in another life. Egyptians became obsessed with the notion of death. During the Middle Kingdom they tried to immortalize everything – from mummified bodies of rulers to the history by means of writings. During this time the monarchs turned away from building pyramids to creating hidden but still luxurious tombs which made it difficult for robbers to find and steal from them. Osiris, the God of Death, became one of the main gods in Egyptian pantheon and many temples were built in his honor.

Under the reign of twelve industry started by Mentuhotep Egypt acquired it previous power. A number of administrative reforms that led to stabilization of economic situation were implemented.

The first attempts also to colonize Nubia happened during this period. It was a strategically important region in trade with sub-Saharan population for Egypt. Apart from golden goods, ivory and other luxuries, Egypt also used Nubia as a source of slaves.

During the Second Intermediate Period an unprecedented event in the history of Egypt happened. As Egypt has always been the conqueror of neighboring countries, it has never considered being conquered on its own territory. However, after Lower and Upper Kingdoms division, the former was invaded by Western Asian army of Hyksos. As Egypt was relatively isolated by geographic conditions and external policy, its army was not ready for invasion. Hyksos easily conquered the territory of Delta of Nile but were pushed out of Upper Egypt. Hyksos ruled for about a century in Egypt and had greatly assimilated with Egyptian culture. They learned hieroglyphic writing and started worshiping Egyptian gods. This shows that Egyptian culture was much more developed than those of the conquerors. However, Egyptians learned from Hyksos too, particularly the way to prepare army, enhance ammunition and weapon in order to push Hyksos out of Lower Egypt.

**Part III** of the book starts with the preparation of ruling dynasty of Upper Egypt to form an army capable of reconquering the Lower Egypt and pushing the enemy out of the country. The plan was successfully implemented by king Kamose and his son Ahmose. He once again became a king of two kingdoms and united the whole country under his monarchic ruling. However, the population of Egypt did not see it that way. The Hyksos were collaborative rulers, non-despotic and had quiet advanced military. Return of pharaonic civilization would mean return to absolute power of the monarch with all other population serving him unconditionally. That is why a number of rebellions started in Upper Egypt. With time all of them were defeated.

After the death of Ahmose, Egypt was not the same anymore. It was powerful as it was during its strongest times, and the monarch was once again at the center of Egyptian religious cult. Ahmose’s son Amenhotep I became the first king of New Kingdom.

The New Kingdom was greatly characterized by return to principles and beliefs of the Old Kingdom. The nature of the monarch was divine as ‘temple and palace were in ancient Egypt the two institutions were inextricably intertwined and mutually reinforcing’. Egypt has returned to its pantheon of gods and many temples were built during this time. Priests were respected and seen as helpers of the pharaoh. As pyramids proved to be not a good place to bury a pharaoh because they pointed the exact location making it easy for robbers to steal the goods buried with pharaoh. However, Egypt still preserved its obsession with grandiose architecture. Architecture shifted from pyramids to temple. New Kingdom was the time when great temples were built such as Karnak and Luxor. On the contrary, the burials of kings were carefully camouflaged in order to protect them from thieves.  All burials of that period were made at the Valley of Kings.

During new kingdom the pharaohs tried to secure the borders of the country by conquering neighboring states and using them as a buffer zone between Egypt and mighty tribes in Asia. King Thutmose I conquered a large part of Nubia and reached the borders of Syria and Euphrates at North. Thutmose’s son married his half-sister Hatshepsut which was a common practice in Ancient Egypt. After the death of her husband Hatshepsut was appointed a regent for her little stepson.  A female regent was not unusual for Egyptians as many rulers died before their heirs came to age. However, what is different about Hatshepsut is that she proclaimed herself a pharaoh. She used to wear men’s attire and false beard. The reign of female king was successful and stable. As she was not a warrior she devoted her resources to art and trade.

After her death, the rightful heir Thutmose III to the throne regained his power. It was the time when territories conquered by Thutmose I started to get out of control of a new empire. Thus, a new pharaoh set up an army and headed to Megiddo whose king refused to pay taxes to Egypt. The battle of Megiddo was one of the first battles that were documented. It was a turning point for Thutmose after which he managed to regain control over the whole territory. Egypt was the greatest colonizing empire of that time.

In 1379 BC Amenkhotep IV came to throne and changed his name to Amen. He proclaimed that there is only one god and it was Amen. The first monotheistic belief was introduced to Egypt. During his reign new techniques in art were also introduced – Amarna art which depicted pharaoh and his family in their everyday life not in the battles or on the throne. After Amenkhotep’s death his son took the throne and returned old religion of many gods and goddesses. Unfortunately, his son Tutankhamun did not outlived his father for long. Having no children, his wife Ankhesenamun was the last descend of the dynasty.

**Part IV** of the book is called Military Might and depicts Ramesside Period. As it is seen from the name, ‘one institution dominates the story of Ramesside Egypt: the army’. This time in Egyptian history is called Ramesside period as 8 pharaohs in succession were called Ramses. All of them were warrior kings and tried to restore the might of Egyptian Empire by ensuring security of north border with Asia.

The most famous king of XIX dynasty was Ramses II who ruled for 66 years. He is known for his military victories. He built a new capital in the North called Pi-Ramesses. In his ambitions his army reached Syria and fought with Hittitis. The most famous battle and probably one of the largest military battles of that time was battle of Kadesh. Although Ramses II claimed the victory it was not clear who won as none gained new territory and both armies lost many warriors. The result of this battle was the first peaceful treaty in history of the world. Hittiti king and Ramses agreed to support each other against the rising power of Assyrians. Ramses was also to marry Hittiti princess which made him unpopular among his own people. Ramses II also continues the tradition of building great architectural complexes. One of the most famous buildings during his reign is Abu Simbel, a mortuary temple carved into the rock cliffs in Nubia.

Ramses’ follower faced another threat from the North, not from Hittitis with whom peace was established but from the so called Sea Peoples. The origin of these people is not clear. Most likely they were refugees looking for a new place to settle. Ramses III defeated the Sea People, however, he lost control of Lybia and Nubia which were providing many resources for the kingdom.

After Ramses III, the fragmentation of Egypt started   as a result of ‘a loss of royal prestige, spiraling food prices, strikes, uncontrolled immigration, widespread corruption, a breakdown in law and order’.

**Part V** which is the last part of the books concentrates on the history of Egypt in the first millennium BC which was characterized by decentralization of power, weakening of military might, numerous conquests by more powerful neighbors.

The invasions started with Lybia which was once conquered by Egypt itself. As the traditions of two countries were alike due to a long period of interactions, Lybians understood Egyptian culture. However, the Lybian dynasty could not hold the country together as many regions went independent. One of such territories was a territory of Kush. The Kushine dynasty ruled Egypt from 730 b.c. to 663 until Assyrian king captured Memphis and claimed to be the ruler of Egypt. In the next century, Persia conquered Egypt followed then by Greek and Roman invasion. The long rule of thriving empire was over for Egypt.

In 332 BC Alexander the Great arrived with his army. He was welcomed as a liberator from Persian conquerors. As Alexander was a smart ruler, he knew that he had to gain the support of people. He made Egyptian priest crown him as a pharaoh and made a pilgrimage to the oracle of Siwa. Alexander the Great also moved the capital to the great city of Alexandria.

After his death his general Ptolemy becomes the ruler of Egypt who started Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. Ptolemy again saw Egypt as a great independent empire with secure borders. That is why the most of his reign was spent in battles against foreign states. However, all rulers of this dynasty favored priests and respected Egyptian traditions in order to receive support and status of pharaoh. The last ruler of Ptolemaic dynasty was Cleopatra who had to face Roman Empire’s claims for Egyptian throne when she was only 20. She tried to protect Egypt form foreign invasion not with the military force but with her witty mind. Unfortunately, she failed and committed suicide. As the author puts it, ‘Suicide must have seemed a better ending than being lynched or than living the rest of her life in captivity’. With Cleopatra’s death, Egypt fell on its knees before Roman Empire for the next 6 centuries.

There is also an epilogue in the book in which author speculates about the fate of Ancient Egypt after the end of pharaonic civilization. He stresses the influence that Egyptian culture had on Western civilization up to Great Britain and other parts of the world.   The author also claims that Egyptian culture still allures by its exoticism and uniqueness, and, thus, the main principle of Egyptian religion – eternity – still characterizes pharaonic civilization.

**Conclusion**

The book by Toby Wilkinson ‘The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt’ contains a vivid description of the ancient Egypt’s history and culture which dates from 3000 BC to 30BC. However, it is not a regular history book in Egyptology. The narration is very cohesive and history organically intermingles with culture. The description of historical events is supported by the artefacts that archeologists have found till now. The cultural values, techniques, and styles of this artefacts are also discussed which expands the book focus from bare historical facts to cultural aspect of a certain period. For that reason, the author incorporated a section with illustration at the end of the book.

The author also shows a dark side of pharaonic civilization which is characterized by devaluation of human life, despotism and exploitation. All this gives more balance understanding of what life was for high class and low-class ancient Egyptians and how they perceived the world in general and their role in it particularly.

The book would be of great interest to Egyptologists, archeologists and other historians as it depicts events and personalities in much detail and preciseness. It would also be of value to artists who are interested in the history of arts and role of Egyptian art in development of Western culture. Regular reader as well will find the book interesting and exciting as it does not simply comprises of historical events and their description but shows all the might and grandiosity of eternal Pharaon civilization.