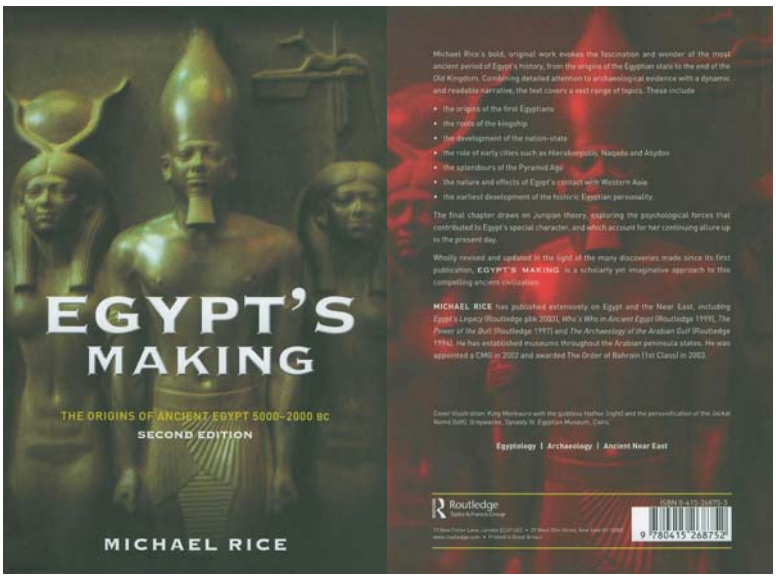
Rice, M. 2003. Egypt's making. The origins of ancient Egypt 5000-2000 BC (2nd edition). – London/New York, Routledge.

Book review by M. Campagno



Thirteen years after its original edition, Michael Rice's 'Egypt's making. The origins of ancient Egypt 5000-2000 BC', has been newly published. Considerably updated and reorganised, Rice's book proposes a consideration of the early stages of ancient Egypt's history, from the first settlements in the Nile Valley to the Old Kingdom, which represents, from the author's perspective, the Egyptian "Golden Age" (p. 8). In particular, Rice's approach tries to establish the reasons that led to the constitution of a state entity along the Nile Valley and Delta, which Rice defines as "the first nation-state in the history of the world" (p. xiii). The Egyptian historical process is thus considered in the wider context of the ancient Near East, specially taking into account the relations between Nile Valley and the regions of Sumer and Elam, which occupy a significant space in the author's explicative strategy. Although Rice does highlight the essentially African character of the ancient Egyptian society and its institutions, a "really profound degree of influence by easterners" (p. 241) in the beginnings of Egyptian civilisation is suggested throughout the book.

After an initial chapter introducing the work's main issues and offering an overview of the Nilotic ecology and the historiography of the epochs analysed, chapters two to six comprise the main events related to Predynastic and early Dynastic Periods. In chapter two, Rice considers the Neolithic contexts of the Nile's desert peripheries (Dakhleh, Nabta Playa), identifying the 'first Egyptians' who would later move to the Nile Valley as a consequence of the climatic deterioration. The phases of Predynastic Period (Badarian, Naqada I and Naqada II) are then described, assigning special relevance to the process of animals domestication. At the end of this chapter, and with particular insistence in chapters three and four, Rice introduces the problem of the links between Egypt and Sumer, particularly evident in the last part of 4th millennium BC, the epoch in which both societies went through the process of state emergence. Even if the author admits that the reasons behind such links are not easy to elucidate, Rice tends to accept the hypothesis of the Asiatic quest for gold in the Nile Valley, and is prone to maintain the route through the Arabian Gulf, sailing around the Arabian peninsula and reaching the Nile Valley through the Wadi Hammamat, as the most probable itinerary.

The parallels pointed out by Rice, which, in any case, would indicate Mesopotamia's influences on Egypt and not the opposite, are very diverse. Most of them, however, does not seem so convincing. Some iconographic motives (such as the figure in the Gebel el-Arak knife-handle or the serpent-felines in some Late Predynastic palettes) and a group of seals certainly suggest a link with Mesopotamia in the last part of 4th millennium BC. On the other hand, a large series of analogies referred to by Rice does not necessarily imply a common origin: there are no reasons either to suppose that the 'idea' of Egyptian writing required an "external stimulus" (p. 65) or to maintain that the barks represented in the Eastern desert (p. 42-45), which clearly belong to the Egyptian iconographic tradition, evoke a Mesopotamian model, beyond some formal similarities with Asiatic representations. The same can be said about certain architectural features registered in both regions (recessed buttresses, use of mud bricks, reed shrines, the oval shape of some temples, the pyramid-like shape of Egyptian tombs and Mesopotamian ziggurats), where similarities are not more significant than the visible differences in their specific implementations in each region. Other vague parallels deserve even less credit, such as those

related to artificial irrigation, shapes of certain objects and symbolic elements (groups of three standing figures, headdresses like the white crown, pear-shaped maceheads, some similarities between Ptah and Enki or between cosmic order's conceptions) or the supposed Asiatic origins of Horus and even of Osiris, just mentioned but not demonstrated by the author.

Beyond the issue of the Mesopotamian influences on Egypt, some comparisons between certain aspects of the process of state emergence in both regions (types of elites, ways of urbanisation), which Rice proposes in chapter four, are particularly attractive. Similarly, in chapter five, the treatment given to the Egyptian conception of the duality, *i.e.* the idea of all cosmic entities as compounds of two complementary halves, very extended in the African realm, is worth mentioning. Such a concept explains both the idea of a dual Egypt (conceived as the compound of the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt) and the king's dual nature (expressed in the coronation rituals, in the double tomb in Abydos and Saqqara as well as in the belief of the royal placenta as the 'twin' of the monarch).

Chapters five and six focus specifically on the early Dynastic Period. The author briefly analyses the reign of each of the monarchs of the 1st and 2nd Dynasties, and elaborates a first appraisal of the "legacy of the founder kings", mainly characterised by the "invention" of kingship and its expansion to the Valley and the Delta, producing the first nation-state of the world (p. 137). This last concept of nation-state which, in any case, is frequent in the Egyptological jargon, is, in the opinion of the present reviewer, openly anachronistic for describing ancient societies, whose characteristics do not fit well with those of modern Western societies, from which the idea of 'nation' is taken. Be this as it may, the long period of "peaceful development" (p. 141) initiated in the early Dynastic Period and continued during the Old Kingdom would produce, according to Rice, a remarkable effect in the psychology of ancient Egyptians: a deep sense of certainty and the belief in a world ordained by a beneficent providence, although such a perception would arise, *contra* Herodotus, in the frame of an "absence of specifically religious commitment or involvement" of the Egyptians (p. 143). This expression sounds, to say the least, unfortunate, even in the sense the author seems to propose (religion as a "business of the king and his immediate colleagues").

Chapters six to ten are centred in Old Kingdom times. Along chapters six, seven and eighth (which refer to the 3rd, 4th and 5th Dynasties), Rice especially highlights the enormous power of management reached by the Egyptian state, which had the most diverse specialists at its disposal and could carry out monumental works such as the pyramid-like tombs of the kings. In the author's opinion, the pyramid-like shape of the royal burials , as well as that of the Mesopotamian ziggurats, corresponds to an archetypal figure: the "sacred mountain" in which the divinities manifested themselves (p. 161). In this sense, Rice's consideration about the state building of pyramids is particularly suggestive: to reconcile cosmic and human orders (p. 166).

In chapters nine and ten, centered in the Old Kingdom final phase and the subsequent First Intermediate Period, the crisis of Egyptian state is considered. This, according to the author's perspective, implies the collapse of a kind of society organised around a god-king, "the ultimate sophistication of the late Neolithic society" (p. 224). Among the reasons of the State power's 'erosion', Rice enumerates the growing power of the regional magnates and the concessions made by the king, corruption, climatic change including low Nile floods, and the arrival of Asiatics and other desert tribes. Thus, the main factors usually pointed out for the central State crisis are indicated, although the way some of them are characterised seems rather misconceived (the local potentates' growing autonomy in terms of "extortions of the feudal nobility", p. 217) or somewhat overestimated (the "devastating effect" of the Asiatics' arrival, p. 218). Be this as it may, the First Intermediate Period is seen by Rice as a collapse which marks a decisive point in the process of 'maturation' of Egyptian society. In particular, the author maintains that the very belief in the king's divinity collapses, and therefore, from the Middle Kingdom onwards, monarchs would be gods "only by courtesy" (p. 213), a variation related to the beginnings of the separation between divine and human spheres, partially attributable, at least, to "the fierce characteristic and individuality of the desert people" (p. 224). Beyond the fact that the author does not demonstrate this last assertion, the present reviewer remains sceptic about such a drastic change in the cosmic perceptions of ancient Egyptians and has no faith in the evolutionary metaphor of the passing from a 'young' Egypt to a 'mature' Egypt used by Rice to symbolise such a change.

Chapter eleven again takes up the question of Egypt's contacts with Mesopotamia and the Arabian Gulf. Rice provides information on the excavations at Barbar, a site in the Bahrain island, probably, the ancient Dilmun, in order to indicate some analogies with Mesopotamian and Egyptian architecture (the Hierakonpolis' 'oval temple' and the tomb of king Khasekhemwy are mentioned). Although the author admits that Barbar constructions were built around a millennium after the Egyptian ones, he suggests the possibility that the builders were people who shared the same tradition. The mere fact that Bahrain is an island is connected by Rice with references of diverse Mesopotamian and Egyptian accounts about a primordial island, and tries to suggest that such an island could have been a real place, which might have faintly remained in the memories of both peoples. However, there is no reason to suppose that such islands, which are mythical and even literary *topoi*, have to refer to concrete places. At the end of this chapter, the author proposes a hypothesis on the role played by

Mesopotamians in Egypt, who would be "the younger sons of rulers, the sons of early Great Men, or the hierarchs of the temples". They would have gone to the Nile "in search of adventure and profit", in such a way that "the princes who created the unified kingdom Egypt were supported by migrants from Sumer" (p. 241). Such a hypothesis practically lacks any evidence and it is excessive, even accepting all the 'analogies' suggested by Rice throughout his book.

Finally, chapter twelve focus on the contribution of C.G. Jung's psychology to the study of ancient Egypt. Rice specially considers the Jungian concept of a collective unconscious, a deep not individual but universal unconscious level, that provides a kind of suprapersonal substratum from which the process of individuation (the progression towards the constitution of the individual psyche) takes place. Beyond the fact that the collective unconscious' concept is not admitted by most part of current psychological trends, and the fact that, from a historian's point of view, establishing the influence of the social milieu on the individual psyche is more relevant than postulating the existence of a generalised unconscious, the main problem with Rice's use of these concepts is the transposition of the individual level of the individuation's process to the social level, what allows him to propose that "the progress of the early rulers towards the concept of the unification of the Valley is thus directly analogous to the process undergone by the psyche when it is moving towards its own individuation" (p. 254). According to Rice, the process in which the Egyptian state emerges constitutes the emergence of the Egyptian 'self', identified with the figure of the king, the 'Great Individual'. This affirmation implies the fact that, before the advent of the state, the inhabitants of the Nile Valley lived in a "collective state of mind" in which "the archetypes should come into existence themselves in a form in which they could be recognized when the collective unconscious demanded that they should be manifest" (p. 259). The suggestion of an ancient Egyptian psyche different, both before and after the advent of the state, from our contemporary psyche is welcomed. However, it is not easy to see what the benefit of applying this questionable conceptual frame is for interpreting the process in which the Egyptian state emerges.

The updating of this second edition of the book regarding the original one deserves a brief consideration. On the one hand, such updating has enriched the work with the knowledge produced along the last decade (for instance, the recent discoveries at Nabta Playa, Buto, Hierakonpolis, and Adaïma have been incorporated). On the other hand, the division of the former six chapters in twelve, subdivided in turn in lesser parts, helps to a better understanding of the work's structure. It is true, however, that the updating produced some unbalances and mistakes which did not appear in the original edition. For instance, in chapter three, the new information on Hierakonpolis has unbalanced the part related to the "Three Predynastic Centres": while 13 pages are devoted to Hierakonpolis, Abydos receives a page and a half, and Naqada just one paragraph. The system of reference notes, explicitly discarded by Rice in the first edition, is included here but only for the new information, in such a way that its use is not homogeneous throughout the book. Regarding the mistakes, the entwined serpent-felines do not appear in Hierakonpolis Tomb 100, as the author indicates (p. 109); the tomb U-j of Abydos should be ascribed to the phase Naqada IIIa2 and not to the phase Naqada II (p. 119); Ity-tawy is the name of Middle Kingdom capital at Lisht and not the ancient name of Memphis (p. 194).

In any case, beyond the criticism here exposed, 'Egypt's making' constitutes a work that introduces the reader, in a serious and documented way, into the complex question of the formation of one of the first state societies in the world. In particular, the emphasis put by Rice on the links between the Nile Valley and Mesopotamia by sea turns him into one of the most strong defenders of this alternative, which, although with very little material evidence on its part, still remains a possibility. As the saying goes, absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence. And it is good for the reader to know the available arguments for supporting such a possibility.

Rice, M. 2003. Egypt's making. The origins of ancient Egypt 5000-2000 BC (2nd edition). – London/New York, Routledge. 312 pp. ISBN 0415268753. Price €39.00 (paperback).