The Study of Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egyptian civilization developed in northeastern Africa in the 3rd millennium BC. Its many achievements, preserved in its art and monuments, hold a fascination that continues to grow as archaeological finds expose its secrets. The term ancient Egypt traditionally refers to northeastern Africa from its prehistory up to the Islamic conquest in the 7th century AD.

Egyptian Religion

Over the centuries, Egyptian religion contained polytheism, henotheism, pluriform monotheism, trinitary speculations, and even a kind of monotheism. Especially in the time of the New Kingdom (16th–11th century bc) and later, there arose theological speculations about many gods and the one god, involving concepts that belong to the realm of pluriform monotheism. These ideas are especially interesting when related to trinitarian conceptions, as they sometimes are. In a New Kingdom hymn to Amon are the words: “Three are all gods: Amon, Re, and Ptah . . . he who hides himself for them [mankind] as Amon, he is Re to be seen, his body is Ptah.” As Amon, he is the “hidden god” (deus absconditus). In Re, the god of the sun, he becomes visible. As Ptah, one of the gods of the earth, he is immanent (indwelling, an activating spirit) in this world.

Nature and Significance

Egyptian religious beliefs and practices were closely integrated into Egyptian society of the historical period (from c. 3000 bc). Although there were probably many survivals from prehistory, these may be relatively unimportant for understanding later times, because the transformation that established the Egyptian state created a new context for religion.

Religious phenomena were pervasive, so much so that it is not meaningful to view religion as a single entity that cohered as a system. Nevertheless, religion must be seen against a background of potentially nonreligious human activities and values. During its more than 3,000 years of development, Egyptian religion underwent significant changes of emphasis and practice, but in all periods, religion had a clear consistency in character and style. It is inappropriate to define religion narrowly, as consisting only in the cult of the gods and in human piety. Religious behaviour encompassed contact with the dead, practices such as divination and oracles, and magic, which mostly exploited divine instruments and associations. There were two essential foci of public religion: the king and the gods. Both are among the most characteristic features of Egyptian civilization. The king had a unique status between humanity and the gods, partook in the world of the gods, and constructed great, religiously motivated funerary monuments for his afterlife. Egyptian gods are renowned for their wide variety of forms, including animal forms and mixed forms with an animal head on a human body. The most important deities were the sun god, who had several names and

aspects, and was associated with many supernatural beings in a Solar cycle modeled on the alternation of night and day, and Osiris, the god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. With his consort, Isis, Osiris became dominant in many contexts during the 1st millennium BC, when solar worship was in relative decline. The Egyptians conceived of the cosmos as including the gods and the present world—whose centre was, of course, Egypt—and as being surrounded by the realm of disorder, from which order had arisen and to which it would finally revert. Disorder had to be kept at bay. The task of the king as the protagonist of human society was to retain the benevolence of the gods in maintaining order against disorder. This ultimately pessimistic view of the cosmos was associated principally with the sun god and the solar cycle. It formed a powerful legitimation of the king and elite in their task of preserving order. Despite this pessimism, the official presentation of the cosmos on the monuments was optimistic, showing the king and the gods in perpetual reciprocity and harmony. This implied contrast reaffirmed the fragile order. The restricted character of the monuments was also fundamental to a system of decorum that defi ned what could be shown, in what way it could be shown, and in what context. Decorum and the affirmation of order reinforced each other. These beliefs are known from monuments and documents created by and for the king and the small elite. The beliefs and practices of the rest of the people are poorly known. While there is no reason to believe that there was a radical opposition between the beliefs of the elite and those of others, this possibility cannot be ruled out.

The only extensive contemporaneous descriptions of ancient Egyptian culture from the outside were made by Classical Greek and Roman writers. Their works include many important observations about Egyptian religion, which particularly interested the writers and which, until late antiquity, was not fundamentally different in type from their own religions. Herodotus (5th century bc) remarked that the Egyptians were the most religious of people, and the comment is apt because popular religious practices proliferated in the 1st millennium bc. Other significant Classical sources include Plutarch's essay on Isis and Osiris (1st century ad), which gives the only known connected narrative of their myth, and the writings of Apuleius (2nd century ad) and others about the Isis cult as it spread in the Greco-Roman world. In other respects, ancient Egypt has been recovered archaeologically. Excavation and the recording of buildings have produced a great range of material, from large monuments to small objects and texts on perishable papyrus. Egyptian monuments are almost unique in the amount of inscription they bear. A vast number of texts and representations with religious content are preserved, especially from the later 2nd and 1st millennia bc. Much of this material is religious or has religious implications. This dominance may be misleading, partly because many monuments were in the desert, where they are well preserved, and partly because the lavishing of great resources on religious monuments for the king and the gods need not mean that people's lives were dominated by religion. In addition to favouring large monuments and the elite, the archaeological record has other important biases. The formal cults of major deities and the realm of the dead are far better

known than everyday religious activities, particularly those occurring in towns and villages, very few of which have been excavated. The absence of material deriving from the religious practice of most people in themselves constitutes evidence suggesting both the inequality of society and the possibility, confirmed by other strands of evidence, that many people's religious life did not focus on the official cult places and major temples. Many official works of art present standard conceptions of the divine world and of the king's role in this world and in caring for the gods. Much religious evidence is at the same time artistic, and the production of works of art was a vital prestige concern of the king and elite. Religious activities and rituals are less well known than this formalized artistic presentation of religious conceptions. The status of personal religion in the context of official cults is poorly understood. Official forms were idealizing, and the untoward, which is everywhere an important focus of religion, was excluded almost entirely from them. The world of the monuments is that of Egypt alone, even though the Egyptians had normal, sometimes reciprocal, relations with other peoples. Decorum affected what was shown. Thus, the king was almost always depicted as the person offering to the gods, although temple rituals were performed by priests. Scenes of offering and of the gods conferring benefits on the king may not depict specific rituals, while the equal form in which king and gods are depicted bears no direct relation to real cult actions, which were performed on small cult images kept inside shrines. An additional limitation is that knowledge of many central concerns was restricted. The king was stated to be alone in knowing aspects of the solar cycle. Knowledge of some religious texts was reserved for initiates, who would benefit from them both in this life and in the next. Magic evoked the power of the exotic and esoteric. Evidence for some restricted material is preserved, but it is not known who had access to it, while in other cases, the restricted knowledge is only alluded to and is now inaccessible. Death and the next world dominate both the archaeological record and popular modern conceptions of Egyptian religion. This dominance is determined to a great extent by the landscape of the country, since tombs were placed, if possible, in the desert. Vast resources were expended on creating prestigious burial places for absolute rulers or wealthy officials. Tombs contained elaborate grave goods (mostly plundered soon after deposition), representations of "daily life," or less commonly of religious subjects, and some texts that were intended to help the deceased attain the next world and prosper there. The texts came increasingly to be inscribed on coffins and stone sarcophagi or deposited in burials on papyrus. Some royal tombs included long passages from religious texts, many of them drawn from nonmortuary contexts and hence more broadly valuable as source material. One crucial area where religion extended beyond narrow bounds was in the ethical instructions, which became the principal genre of Egyptian literature. These are known from the Middle Kingdom (c. 1900–1600 bc) to the Roman period (1st century ad). As with other sources, the later texts are more overtly religious, but all show inextricable connections between proper conduct, the order of the world, and the gods.

Egyptian Art and Architecture

Relief Sculpture and Painting

For Egyptians, the decoration of tomb walls with reliefs or painted scenes provided some certainty of the perpetuation of life; in a temple, similarly, it was believed that mural decoration magically ensured the performance of important ceremonies and reinforced the memory of royal deeds. The earliest appearance of a mural Decoration is to be found in tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, presumably the grave of a powerful local chieftain; it is dated to the early Gerzean (Naqādah II) period. Although technically they are considered small objects, the large ceremonial palettes that appear around the beginning of the dynastic period represent the earliest religious relief sculptures, which would eventually find their place on the walls of temples built in stone, after the appearance of that medium. The beginnings of the dynastic tradition can be found in tombs of the 3rd dynasty, such as that of Hesire at S ·aqqārah; it contained mural paintings of funerary equipment and wooden panels carrying figures of Hesire in the finest low relief. Generally speaking, mural decorations were in paint when the ground was mud brick or stone of poor quality, and in relief when the walls were in good stone. Painting and drawing formed the basis of what was to be carved in relief, and the finished carving was itself commonly painted. In tombs, the mural decorations might be left unfinished, being only partly sketched or partly carved by the time of the burial. Uncompleted scenes reveal clearly the methods of laying out walls for decoration. The prepared wall was marked out with red guidelines, the grid described earlier being used for major human figures and sometimes for minor ones. Preliminary outlines were corrected in black, and paint was applied usually in tempera, with pigments being mostly mineral-based. In the Old Kingdom, pure painting of the highest quality is found as early as the 4th dynasty, in the scene of geese from the tomb of Nefermaat and Atet at Maydum. But the glory of Old Kingdom mural decoration is the low-relief work in the royal funerary monuments of the 5th dynasty and in the private tombs of the 5th and 6th dynasties in the Memphite necropolis. Outstanding are the reliefs from the sun temple of King Neuserre at Abu Jīrab and the scenes of daily life in the tombs of Ptahhotep and Ti at S
·aqqārah.

The tradition of fine painting was continued in the Middle Kingdom. At Beni Hasan, the funerary chambers are crowded with paintings exhibiting fine draftsmanship and use of colour. The best relief work of the period, reviving the Memphite tradition, is found at Thebes in the tomb of Mentuhotep II at Dayr al-Bahī · rī and in the little shrine of Sesostris I at Karnak, where the fine carving is greatly enhanced by a masterly use of space in the disposition of figures and text.

In the early 18th dynasty, the relief tradition was revived at Thebes and can best be observed in the carvings in Hatshepsut's temple at Dayr al-Bah ·rī. Later royal reliefs of Amenhotep III and of the post-Amarna kings show a stylistic refinement that was carried to its best in the reign of Seti I at Karnak, at Abydos, and in his tomb at Thebes. The 18th dynasty also saw Egyptian painting reach its highest achievement in the tombs of the nobles at Thebes. The medium of decoration and an increased range of motifs felt appropriate for tomb decoration led to the introduction of small, often entertaining details into standard scenes. The tiny

tombs of Menna and Nakht are full of such playful vignettes. The paintings in great tombs, such as that of Rekhmire, are more formal but still crammed with unusual detail. Fragments of mural and floor paintings from palaces and houses at Thebes and Tell el-Amarna provide tantalizing glimpses of the marsh and garden settings of everyday upper-class life.
The fine royal reliefs of the late 18th dynasty were matched by those in private tombs at Thebes (Ramose and Kheruef) and S ·aqqārah (Horemheb); these are breathtaking in execution and, in the case of Horemheb, both moving and original. Mastery of large-scale relief compositions subsequently passed to the work in the temples of the 19th and 20th dynasties. The most dramatic subject was war, whether the so-called triumph of Ramses II at Kadesh (Thebes and Abu Simbel), or the more genuine successes of Ramses III against the Libyans and the Sea Peoples (Madīnat Habu). The size and vitality of these ostentatious scenes are stupendous, even if their execution tends to be slapdash. The artistic renaissance of the 25th and 26th dynasties is evident in painting and relief as well as in sculpture. Although the fine work in the tomb of Montemhat at Thebes is distinctly archaizing, it is, nevertheless, exceptional in quality. The skills of the Egyptian draftsman, nurtured by centuries of exercise at large and small scale, remained highly professional. This skill is seen at its most consistent level in the illumination of papyruses. The practice of including drawings, often painted, in religious papyruses flourished from the time of the 18th dynasty and reached a high point about 1300 bc. The peak of achievement is probably represented by the Book of the Dead of the scribe Ani, in the vignettes of which both technique and the use of colour are outstanding. Subsequently, and especially in the Late period, pure line drawing was increasingly employed.

Plastic Arts

In Egypt, pottery provided the basic material for vessels of all kinds. Fine wares and many other small objects were made from faience. Glass arrived late on the scene and was used somewhat irregularly from the New Kingdom onward.

Pottery

Generally speaking, Egyptian pottery had few artistic pretensions. In the tomb of Tutankhamen, most of the pottery vessels were simple wine jars in the form of amphorae. It is surprising that no finer pottery vessels were found, because high-quality ware was made during the late 18th and 19th dynasties, often brightly painted with floral designs. Pottery was rarely modeled, although human and animal figures occur in small numbers throughout the Dynastic period. Small vessels in animal form were also made, especially during the Middle and New kingdoms, and a fine category of highly burnished red pottery vases in female form was produced during the 18th dynasty.

Faience

The use of pottery was filled with modeled faience objects (a glazed composition of ground quartz), most commonly blue or green in colour. In the Early Dynastic period, it was much used for the making of small animal and human figures, and throughout the Dynastic period,

it continued to be used in this way, among the most striking results being the blue-glazed hippopotamus figures of Middle Kingdom date. In the Late period, in particular, the making of amulets and divine figurines in faience was highly developed, and many pieces display a high standard of molding and perfection of glazing. The vast quantities of ushabti (shabti, or shawabty), small statuettes that stood in for the deceased, are mostly routine work, but the finest examples from the New Kingdom, and some of Saite date, show complete mastery of a difficult technique. Faience tiles were also first made in the early dynasties and were used chiefly for wall decoration, as in the subterranean chambers of the Step Pyramid. In the New Kingdom, tiles with floral designs were used in houses and palaces in the reigns of Amenhotep III and his successors. During the 19th and 20th dynasties, royal palaces at Per Ramessu (modern Qantīr), Tell al-Yahudīyah, and Madīnat Habu were embellished with remarkable polychrome tiles, many of which bear figures of captive foreigners. Throughout the Dynastic period, faience was regularly used for simple beads, amulets, and other components of jewelry. Quite exceptional is the extraordinary was-sceptre (a symbol of divine power) found at Tūkh, near Naqādah. It is dated to the reign of Amenhotep II and originally measured about six and a half feet (two metres) in length.

Glass

In the form of glaze, glass was known to the ancient Egyptians from early pre-dynastic times, but the material was not used independently until the 18th dynasty. From the mid-18th dynasty and during the 19th dynasty, glass was used for small amulets, beads, inlays, and especially for small vessels. The material was opaque, blue being the predominant colour, although other bright colours were also achieved. The vessels, made around sand cores, were mostly drinking cups or flasks for precious liquids and were often decorated with trailed patterns applied as glass threads. Glass was certainly a material of luxury, a fact confirmed by the presence of two glass goblets with gold rims among a treasure of precious vessels from the reign of Thutmose III. The use of glass for inlay is notably demonstrated in Tutankhamen's golden throne, in his solid gold mask, and in much of his jewelry. After the 19th dynasty, glass manufacture seems largely to have been discontinued until the Late period, when the use of glass for inlays was revived.

Jewelry

Gold provided Egyptian jewelry with its richness; it was used for settings, cloisonné work, chains, and beads, both solid and hollow. Soldering, granulation, and wire making were practiced. Precious stones were not used, but a wide range of semiprecious stones was exploited: carnelian, amethyst, garnet, red and yellow jasper, lapis lazuli, feldspar, turquoise, and agate. Additional colours and textures were provided by faience and glass. Ancient Egyptian jewelers had a fine eye for colour and an excellent sense of design. From the earliest dynasties come bracelets from the tomb of King Djer at Abydos; from the 4th dynasty, the

armlets of Queen Hetepheres, of silver inlaid with carnelian, turquoise, and lapis lazuli. There are examples of splendid and delicate jewelry dating from the Middle Kingdom; in particular, pieces were found at Dahshūr and Al-Lāhūn—circlets of Princess Khnumet, pectorals of Princess Sithathor and Queen Meret, and girdles of Princess Sithathor-iunet. The large and spectacular collection of jewelry buried with Queen Ahhotep of the early 18th dynasty includes many unusual designs; her gold chain is a masterpiece. Much fine 18th-dynasty jewelry has survived, but all is dominated by that of Tutankhamen. This huge collection demonstrates all the techniques of the goldsmiths and the lapidary's arts.

Copper and Bronze

The techniques of metalworking were probably introduced into Egypt from the Middle East at a very early date. At first, copper was most commonly used, but from at least the late 3rd millennium, it was often alloyed with tin, as bronze. The skill and artistry of the metalworker are shown in the fine bowls, jugs, and other vessels from all periods and in statues and statuettes of gods, kings, and ordinary mortals. Most vessels were made by raising metal ingots beaten on wooden anvils. In the Late period, many vessels were produced by casting. Huge situlae, vessels used for carrying sacred liquids, are often decorated with scenes and inscriptions. The earliest and largest metal figure from Egypt is the life-size statue of Pepi I, made of copper plates fitted to a wooden core; the plates were probably beaten, not cast. Casting in open molds was developed early for tools and weapons, but the lost-wax process (cire-perdue), using closed molds, was not employed until the Middle Kingdom. Even in the 18th dynasty, the casting of bronze figures occurred only on a relatively small scale. The casting of large-scale bronze figures achieved its highest point in the late New Kingdom down to the 25th dynasty. The outstanding example from this period is the figure of Karomama. The exceptionally elegant modeling of the female form is greatly enriched by inlays of gold and silver reproducing the feathered pattern of the gown and an elaborate collar of floral motifs. In the Late period, huge numbers of excellent castings of conventional sacred figures and animals were produced. The so-called Gayer-Anderson cat is technically and artistically without peer.

Gold and Silver

Gold was more easily obtainable in ancient Egypt than silver and was therefore less valuable (until the late New Kingdom). Gold was also easier to work with and unaffected by environmental conditions. In consequence, many more gold than silver objects have survived. Apart from jewelry, gold was lavishly used for many decorative purposes as thin sheet, leaf, and inlay, in funerary equipment, and for vessels and furniture. The range of uses is best exemplified in the objects from the tomb of Tutankhamen.

The gold-plated, gold-inlaid furniture of Queen Hetepheres of 4th-dynasty date reveals how early Egyptian craftsmen mastered the working of gold. Gold vessels have rarely survived,

but those from the royal burials of Tanis preserve styles and techniques that go back to the traditions of the New Kingdom and earlier. Gold statuettes are also rare, but again, surviving examples, such as the magnificent falcon head of a cult statue of 6th-dynasty date from Hierakonpolis and the divine triad of Osiris, Isis, and Horus of the 22nd dynasty, show the achievements of early and late times. In a hoard of precious vessels found at Bubastis and dated to the 19th dynasty, there were three silver pieces of exceptional interest, in particular a jug whose handle is of gold and in the shape of a goat. Greater availability of silver in later times is demonstrated by two massive silver coffins and many vessels in the royal burials at Tanis.

Wood

The wooden sculpture of the Old Kingdom shows the carver of wood at his most skillful and sensitive. But it is in the field of cabinetmaking that the ancient woodworker excelled. Best known are the many chairs, tables, stools, beds, and chests found in Tutankhamen's tomb. Many of the designs are exceptionally practical and elegant. Techniques of inlay, veneering, and marquetry are completely mastered. One chest is veneered with strips of ivory and inlaid with 33,000 small pieces of ivory and ebony. Fine furniture was being produced in very early times, as is confirmed by the skillfully restored furniture from the secondary burial of Hetepheres. Among the most charming and delicate products of the Egyptian woodworker are the many toilet spoons and containers in the form of graceful swimming girls, lute players in the marshes, and fish and animals. At the other extreme, nothing is more remarkable than the great boat, more than 140 feet (43 metres) long, found in a trench by the side of the Great Pyramid.

Ivory and Bone

Of the few small ivory figurines to have survived from pharaonic times, two royal representations found in the Early Dynastic temple at Abydos are outstanding. There can be little doubt, despite the paucity of survivals, that fine decorative objects of ivory were made at all periods. A gazelle and a grasshopper of the 18th dynasty may truly be described as objets de vertu. Many fine examples of the use of ivory were found in Tutankhamen's tomb, from simple geometric marquetry patterns to box panels carved with exquisitely informal scenes of the king with his queen.

GRECO-ROMAN Egypt

After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, the independent rule of pharaohs in the strict sense came to an end. Under the Ptolemies, whose rule followed Alexander's, profound changes took place in art and architecture. The most lasting impression of the new period is made by its architectural legacy. Although very little survives of important funerary architecture, there is a group of tombs at Tunah al-Jabal of unusual form and great

importance. Most interesting is the tomb of Petosiris, high priest of Thoth in nearby Hermopolis Magna in the late 4th century bc. It is in the form of a small temple with a pillared portico, elaborate column capitals, and a large forecourt. In its mural decorations, a strong Greek influence merges with the traditional Egyptian modes of expression. A boom in temple building of a more conventional kind followed the establishment of the Ptolemaic regime. At Dandarah, Esna, Idfū, Kawm Umbū (Kôm Ombo), and Philae, the Egyptian cult temple can be studied better than at almost any earlier temple. Though erected by the Macedonian rulers of Egypt, these late temples employ purely Egyptian architectural conventions but include flourishes that appear only in the Ptolemaic period, such as pillars in the shape of colossal sistra, Composite capitals with elaborate floral forms, monumental screen walls, and subterranean crypts. The temple of Horus at Idfū is the most complete, displaying all the essential elements of the classical Egyptian temple, but for the exploitation of setting and richness of detail, it is difficult to fault the temples of Philae and Kawm Umbū, in particular.

In relief carving, a noticeable change had taken place in the conventional proportions of human figures during the Saite period, and subsequently, with added influences from Greek art, a more voluptuous style of human representation developed. Yet there is much to admire in the best reliefs of the Hathor Temple at Dandarah and in the double cult temple of Sebek and Horus at Kawm Umbū.

Generous representation of the human form, especially the female form, also characterizes the sculpture of the Ptolemaic period, and there is little to match the figure of Queen Arsinoe II. It is in the treatment of the head, however, that the greatest changes took place. It is a matter of debate whether the new emphasis on portraiture was attributable to influences from the Classical world or was a development of earlier Egyptian sculptural tendencies. Fine pieces such as the schist “green” head of a man could not have failed to impress the observer from the Ptolemaic court or the later Roman administration. One of the finest surviving heads, in diorite and slightly larger than life-size and of dominating appearance, is the “black” head now in the Brooklyn Museum. Throughout the Ptolemaic period, votive sculptures of private persons were made in great quantity. After the Roman conquest, it became rare and of indifferent quality. Such Egyptian art as can be isolated in the Roman period is found in funerary equipment—in coffins, shrouds, and panel portraits. A mixture of Egyptian and Classical styles and of diverse symbolisms can be observed. The great shroud showing the deceased and his mummy protected by the mortuary deity, Anubis, while harking back to the traditions of pharaonic Egypt, also displays in the figure of the deceased a style that points to Byzantium. The mummy, or Fayum, portraits are Egyptian only in that they are associated with essentially Egyptian burial customs. Painted in an encaustic technique, they represent mostly Greek inhabitants of Egypt. Seen properly in context, as in the complete mummy of Artemidorus, they provide a strange epilogue to the funerary art of 3,000 years of pharaonic Egypt. In this field and in a few others, the vigour of the native tradition persisted artistically

up to the Roman conquest. Thereafter, the decline was rapid and complete. By the 3rd century AD, Egypt was on the way to becoming a Christian country. The old tradition was not only destroyed, but it was no longer valued. Coptic art was to find its inspiration elsewhere.