< ART OF THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN | EGYPTIAN ART AND CULTURE | A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ANCIENT EGYPT

Ancient Egypt, an introduction

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Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, Old Kingdom, c. 2675-2625 B.C.E. Photo: Dr Amy Calvert

Egypt's impact on later cultures was immense. You could say that Egypt provided the building blocks for Greek and Roman culture, and, through them, influenced all of the Western tradition. Today, Egyptian imagery, concepts, and perspectives are found everywhere; you will find them in architectural forms, on money, and in our

day to day lives. Many cosmetic surgeons, for example, use the silhouette of Queen Nefertiti (whose name means "the beautiful one has come") in their advertisements.

This introduction will provide you with the primary filters to view and understand ancient Egypt.

Longevity

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for more than 3000 years and showed an incredible amount of continuity. That is more than 15 times the age of the United States, and consider how often our culture shifts; less than 10 years ago, there was no Facebook, Twitter, or Youtube.

While today we consider the Greco-Roman period to be in the distant past, it should be noted that Cleopatra VII's reign (which ended in 30 BCE) is closer to our own time than it was to that of the construction of the pyramids of Giza. It took humans nearly 4000 years to build something--anything--taller than the Great Pyramids. Contrast that span to the modern era; we get excited when a record lasts longer than a decade.

Consistency & Stability

Egypt's stability is in stark contrast to the Ancient Near East of the same period, which endured an overlapping series of cultures and upheavals with amazing regularity. The earliest royal monuments, such as the Narmer Palette carved around 3100 B.C.E., display identical royal costumes and poses as those seen on later rulers, even Ptolemaic kings on their temples 3000 years later.



Palette of Narmer, c. 3000-2920 B.C.E. (left) and Ramses III smiting at Medinet Habu (1160 B.C.E.) (right)

A vast amount of Egyptian imagery, especially royal imagery that was governed by decorum (a sense of what was 'appropriate'), remained stupefyingly consistent throughout its history. This is why, especially to the untrained eye, their art appears extremely static—and in terms of symbols, gestures, and the way the body is rendered, it was. It was intentional. The Egyptians were aware of their consistency, which they

viewed as stability, divine balance, and clear evidence of the correctness of their culture.

This consistency was closely related to a fundamental belief that depictions had an impact beyond the image itself—tomb scenes of the deceased receiving food, or temple scenes of the king performing perfect rituals for the gods—were functionally causing those things to occur in the divine realm. If the image of the bread loaf was omitted from the deceased's table, they had no bread in the Afterlife; if the king was depicted with the incorrect ritual implement, the ritual was incorrect and this could have dire consequences. This belief led to an active resistance to change in codified depictions.

The earliest recorded tourist graffiti on the planet came from a visitor from the time of Ramses II who left their appreciative mark at the already 1300-year-old site of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, the earliest of the massive royal stone monuments. They were understandably impressed by the works of their ancestors and endeavored to continue that ancient legacy.

Geography

Egypt is a land of duality and cycles, both in topography and culture. The geography is almost

entirely rugged, barren desert, except for an explosion of green that straddles either side of the Nile as it flows the length of the country. The river emerges from far to the south, deep in Africa, and empties into the Mediterranean sea in the north after spreading from a single channel into a fan-shaped system, known as a delta, at its northernmost section.

The influence of this river on Egyptian culture and development cannot be overstated—without its presence, the civilization would have been entirely different, and most likely entirely elsewhere. The Nile provided not only a constant source of life-giving water, but created the fertile lands that fed the growth of this unique (and uniquely resilient) culture.



View from the high peak of the Theban hills showing the sharp delineation between the lush Valley and the barren desert. Photo: Dr

Each year, fed by melting snows in the far-off headlands, the river overflowed its banks in an annual flood that covered the ground with a rich, black silt and produced incredibly fertile fields. The Egyptians referred to this as Kemet, the "black lands," and contrasted this dense, dark soil against the Deshret, the "red lands" of the sterile desert; the line between these zones was (and in most cases still is) a literal line. The visual effect is stark, appearing almost artificial in its precision.

Time - Cyclical and Linear

The annual inundation of the Nile was also a reliable, and measurable, cycle that helped form their concept of the passage of time. In fact, the calendar we use today is derived from one developed by the ancient Egyptians. They divided the year into 3 seasons: akhet "inundation," peret "growing/emergence." and shemw "harvest." Each season was, in turn, divided into four 30-day months. Although this annual cycle, paired with the daily solar cycle that is so evident in the desert, led to a powerful drive to see the universe in cyclical time, this idea existed simultaneously with the reality of linear time.

These two concepts—the cyclical and the linear—came to be associated with two of their primary deities: Osiris, the eternal lord of the dead, and Re, the sun god who was reborn with each dawn.

Early Development: The Predynastic Period

The civilization of Egypt obviously did not spring fully formed from the Nile mud; although the massive pyramids at Giza may appear to the uninitiated to have appeared out of nowhere, they were founded on thousands of years of cultural and technological development and experimentation. "Dynastic" Egypt—sometimes referred to as "Pharaonic" (after "pharaoh," the Greek title of the Egyptian kings derived from the Egyptian title *per aA*, "Great House") which was the time when the country was largely unified under a single ruler, begins around 3100 B.C.E.

The period before this, lasting from about 5000 B.C.E. until unification, is referred to as Predynastic by modern scholars. Prior to this were thriving Paleolithic and Neolithic groups, stretching back hundreds of thousands of years, descended from northward migrating homo erectus who settled along the Nile Valley. During the Predynastic period, ceramics, figurines, mace heads, and other artifacts such as slate palettes

used for grinding pigments, begin to appear, as does imagery that will become iconic during the Pharaonic era—we can see the first hints of what is to come.

Dynasties

It is important to recognize that the dynastic divisions modern scholars use were not used by the ancients themselves. These divisions were created in the first Western-style history of Egypt, written by an Egyptian priest named Manetho in the 3rd century B.C.E. Each of the 33 dynasties included a series of rulers usually related by kinship or the location of their seat of power. Egyptian history is also divided into larger chunks, known as "kingdoms" and "periods," to distinguish times of strength and unity from those of change, foreign rule, or disunity.

	Dates
om (the 'pyramid age')	c. 2649 - 2150 B.C.E.
mediate Period	c. 2150 - 2030 B.C.E.
igdom	c. 2030 - 1640 B.C.E.
ermediate Period Delta region ruled by Asiatics)	c. 1640 – 1540 B.C.E.
lom	c. 1550 - 1070 B.C.E.
rmediate Period	c. 1070 - 713 B.C.E.
d om foreign dynasties, including Nubian, Libyan n rulers)	c. 712 – 332 B.C.E.
Period Greco-Romans)	c. 332-30 B.C.E.

The Egyptians themselves referred to their history in relation to the ruler of the time. Years

were generally recorded as the regnal dates (from the Latin regnum, meaning kingdom or rule) of the ruling king, so that with each new reign, the numbers began anew. Later kings recorded the names of their predecessors in vast "kinglists" on the walls of their temples and depicted themselves offering to the rulers who came before them—one of the best known examples is in the temple of Seti I at Abydos.

These lists were often condensed, with some rulers (such as the contentious and disruptive Akhenaten) and even entire dynasties omitted from the record; they are not truly history, rather they are a form of ancestor worship, a celebration of the consistency of kingship of which the current ruler was a part.

The Pharaoh—Not Just a King

Kings in Egypt were complex intermediaries that straddled the terrestrial and divine realms. They were, obviously, living humans, but upon accession to the throne, they also embodied the eternal office of kingship itself. The ka, or spirit, of kingship was often depicted as a separate entity standing behind the human ruler. This divine aspect of the office of kingship was what gave authority to the human ruler. The living king was associated with the god Horus, the powerful,

virile falcon-headed god who was believed to bestow the throne to the first human king.

Horus's immensely important father, Osiris, was the lord of the underworld. One of the original divine rulers of Egypt, this deity embodied the promise of regeneration. Cruelly murdered by his brother Seth, the god of the chaotic desert, Osiris was revived through the potent magic of his wife Isis. Through her knowledge and skill, Osiris was able to sire the miraculous Horus, who avenged his father and threw his criminal uncle off the throne to take his rightful place.

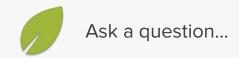
Osiris became ruler of the realm of the dead, the eternal source of regeneration in the Afterlife.

Deceased kings were identified with this god, creating a cycle where the dead king fused with the divine king of the dead and his successor "defeated" death to take his place on the throne as Horus.

Essay by Dr. Amy Calvert

An introduction to ancient Egypt from the British Museum

Egyptian art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

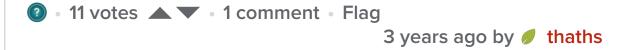


Questions

Tips & Thanks

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This article talks about the river Nile's annual flood being the result of snow melt at the origin of the river. Is this correct? As I understand it the two snow capped peaks in Africa - Kilimanjaro and m mount Kenya - are not sources for the Nile.



This is a bit simplistic - but hey, it's a one page introduction.

There are now many known tributaries for the Nile. One of the biggest, know as the Blue Nile, originates most from snow melt in the Nuba mountains of Sudan. This southern part of the Nile was home to the Kush. This area has had a close relationship with Egypt; over thousands of years Kush has been a territory of, in subjugation to, and the overlord of, ancient Egypt.

Show all 5 answers • Answer this question

Maybe picky but isn't it Ra rather than Re? Or is Re an alternate spelling?

8 votes ▲ ▼ • 1 comment • Flag

2 years ago by 锋 eric

They didn't write vowels in the hieroglyphs so we're kind of just guessing with letters so both Ra and Re are accepted.

20 votes Comment • Flag
 2 years ago by Regina Fairbanks

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Is there a picture of the "tourist graffiti" on the Step Pyramid at Saqqara? I couldn't find any. You talked about it in the last paragraph of the "Consistency & Stability" section.

6 votes ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag

2 years ago by ø girlofnarnia

At this site there is a picture but not much information about it.

http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/dsteppyramid4.htm

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2 years ago by Katie Dooley

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How did humans translate heriogliphics?

5 votes ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag 2 years ago by 🌠 sonia

They used the Rosetta stone, and compared the hieroglyphics to other languages. Have a look here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decipherment_of_hieroglyphic_writing to see how different generations tried to crack the code :-)

5 votes ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag

2 years ago by Madeliv

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where does the nile come from? and how does it flow north?

5 votes ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag

3 years ago by ** Reese Veda

The river flows north because of the topography (an area's land surface and physical features) of the region. You know how water will flow down a mountain; it is similar in this area of northeastern Africa where the sources and tributaries of the Nile are, in general, at higher elevation than the Nile delta.

You can see in this map on wikipedia, that the Nile delta is lower than where the river starts at the Lake near the bottom of the map, Lake Nassar. There are many sources and tributaries... (more)

6 votes ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag
3 years ago by ø amichelewicz

Show all 2 answers • Answer this question

What is your opinion as the the validity of Carnieros's circumscription theory on the formation of Egypt as a primary civilization? It seems to make sense to me, but I have heard it has fallen out of favor.

4 votes ▲ ▼ • 1 comment • Flag

3 years ago by 🌉 markomalley

The problem with Carnieros theory is its simplicity and the focus on warfare as a cause for the first civiliziations. And there is much evidence against that.

There are many more reasons. Economic benefits are chief among them.

5 votes 📤 🔻 • Comment • Flag 3 years ago by 🥖 TB

Answer this question...

Wasn't Narmer the 1st Egyptian pharaoh?

Yes and no. Narmer is deemed the first pharaoh of the First Dynasty and is credited with unifying Upper and Lower Egypt. We can identify a series of earlier rulers belonging to the Predynastic period and assigned to "Dynasty O".

5 votes ▲ ▼ • 1 comment • Flag 8 months ago by **Jeffrey A. Becker**

Answer this question...

Are there any names for any of the Predynastic cultures of Egypt?

1 vote ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag
about a year ago by **‡** Edge (aka Dr. Rennie of Vulf) Bourret

The Naqada I culture is active ca. 4000-3500 BCE, Naqada II ca. 3500-3200 BCE, Naqada III ca. 3200-3150 BCE. The latter phase is usually labeled as "Dynasty 0" or "Protodynastic", giving way to the First Dynasty when Narmer was king (see the Narmer palette). The Protodynastic phase(s) was one of growing political unification, and nascent state

formation processes.

5 votes ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag
about a year ago by / Jeffrey A. Becker

Answer this question...

Are pyramids still being built today?

2 votes ▲ ▼ • 1 comment • Flag

2 years ago by 🔋 Tej

Stone pyramids like the ancient Egyptians build(massive stone, with only small rooms inside) aren't being made anymore and haven't been made on that scale for a long time. However pyramid shaped buildings are still being made out of other materials today. Famous examples are the Louvre pyramid, the luxor hotel pyramid and the Walter pyramid at long beach.

2 votes 🔺 🔻 • Comment • Flag

2 years ago by 🐲 michelle

Show all 4 answers • Answer this question

How was the murder and resurrection of Osiris? There are multiple versions of it or only one?

1 vote ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag

6 months ago by • Rcarranza

This is a complex tale, not revealed directly (the Egyptians rarely directly discussed the murder of Osiris). The tale we have was pieced together from multiple sources.

3 votes ▲ ▼ • Comment • Flag

6 months ago by Amy Calvert

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