

# Ancient Egypt

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Ancient Egypt was one of the most stable and unchanging cultures of all time, with an artistic style that remained almost exactly the same over a period of approximately 3,000 years. Geography provided the Egyptians with a great deal of stability. Protected by hundreds of miles of desert in either direction, the Egyptians remained isolated from invasion by outside groups. The flooding of the Nile River was not chaotic and destructive, but rather consistent. Farmers could plant their crops according to when the Nile flooded. This was both positive and negative, since the unchanging nature of Egypt contributed to closed-minded attitudes regarding religion and culture. This particular lesson covers:



### BIG IDEA

Ancient Egypt is one of the most important and influential civilizations in history. Not only did it influence ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, but we also see many popular culture references to Egypt in the present. In addition, the discovery of new archaeological sites and new ways of understanding ancient Egypt continue to capture our imagination.

## 1. Period and Location: Ancient Egypt

The entire expanse of the ancient Egyptian empire covers a little less than 3,000 years and extends from about 3100 BCE to 332 BCE. Egyptian history is also broken up by **dynasty**, which is a period in which all the rulers come from one family. When this line was broken, a new dynasty began.



The above timeline depicts the period this lesson covers.

The **Nile River**, very important in terms of religion, culture, and agriculture, runs through the middle of Egypt. In fact, the annual flooding of the Nile deposited the silt, or the nutrient-rich soil, that the Egyptians depended on to grow food in such an arid region. The Nile was the lifeline of ancient Egypt. The mild climate and relatively easy living conditions of ancient Egypt contributed to the idea that the afterlife was not a place of eternal punishment, but rather an extension of their everyday lives. Much of Egyptian art found in tombs functioned as a way to maintain consistency between this world and the afterworld. Tombs contained all of the

objects that a person would need for the afterlife. In addition, mummies were meant to house the **ka**, or spirit. However, if a mummy were destroyed, an alternative was necessary. This was a legitimate concern, since looting and destruction of tombs was commonplace, even at that time. Sculptures of pharaohs developed as alternative places to house the ka.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Dynasty**

A series of rulers from the same family.

##### **Nile River**

The longest river in the world, located in East Africa and flowing from the Mediterranean Sea.

##### **Ka**

One aspect of the soul, according to ancient Egyptian religion. The ka needs a vessel in which to be housed. This could be a mummy or a sculpture.

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## 2. Ancient Egypt and Religion

The Egyptian creation myth was based on the yearly flooding of the Nile River valley. At first, the entire earth was covered in primordial flood waters, which eventually receded, leaving behind a mound. This mound was the inspiration both for the mastaba, a slab-shaped tomb, and the benben, the stone that sat atop pyramids. The primordial mound supported the sun and **Ra**, the sun god. Ra first brought light into the world.

Ra then created three children—**Isis**, **Osiris**, and **Seth**, or Set. Osiris married Isis, and Set, who was extremely jealous of his brother, decided to murder him. Isis grieved the loss of her husband and gathered up his mutilated remains. She used these to bring him back to life through magic, and they ended up creating a son together named **Horus**.

All these deities are important in their own right and were honored in countless different ways. Osiris is of particular importance because he became in charge of the afterlife.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The notion that the ka, or spirit, survives death is important because the Egyptian traditions associated with death led to the creation of some of the most recognizable artifacts and monuments associated with ancient Egypt, namely the mummified remains and great pyramids at Giza.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Ra**

Egyptian sun god, a universal creator, typically represented as a hawk-headed man with a solar disk and uraeus, or cobra, on his head.

##### **Isis**

Egyptian goddess of fertility, represented as a woman with cow's horns and a solar disk between them, also worshiped in ancient Rome and Greece.

##### **Osiris**

Egyptian god and judge of the dead, represented as a man partly wrapped as a mummy with a beard and wearing a crown.

## Seth

Egyptian god of deserts, storms, and foreigners; also called Set.

## Horus

Egyptian sun deity, represented by a falcon or as a man with the head of a falcon.

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# 3. Palette of Narmer

The Palette of Narmer is an important piece of ceremonial propaganda. Narmer is believed to be the first pharaoh, or king, of an ancient unified Egypt, and this palette describes that story. The Palette of Narmer dates to about 2950 BCE. It is a relief carving in a hard type of metamorphic rock called schist. It's broken up into horizontal bands, or ground lines, which create panels called the **registers**.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is the Palette of Narmer. Notice the use of the **hieratic scale**. Remember, this is the same scale as was used in ancient Mesopotamian steles.



Palette of Narmer

~2950 BCE

Schist

Narmer is the largest and most important figure in the above composition. A small, rectangular **pictograph** identifies him as the king.

## IN CONTEXT

As you observe this image of the Palette of Narmer, you might notice some additional notable elements. First, there is a sandal-bearing servant to Narmer's right, and an unlucky gentleman about to get whacked with the mace. You can tell that this is a major figure from lower Egypt, because it is shown by a pictograph or hieroglyph on the far right. The inclusion of the god Horus here adds an element of divine authority.

There are also two "hats." On the left is the white hat of upper Egypt, where Narmer was king. On the right, we see Narmer wearing the unified hat of both kingdoms while observing some post-battle presentation of decapitated enemies. Finally, at the bottom, there are two lion-headed creatures intertwined, possibly suggesting a unified Egypt. In the center is a circular depression that would have typically been used as a place to crush pigments for use as eyeliner, although this palette was probably never used that way.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Register**

The division of a composition into bands.

##### **Hieratic Scale**

A system that represents sizes of things according to importance and based on fixed religious traditions.

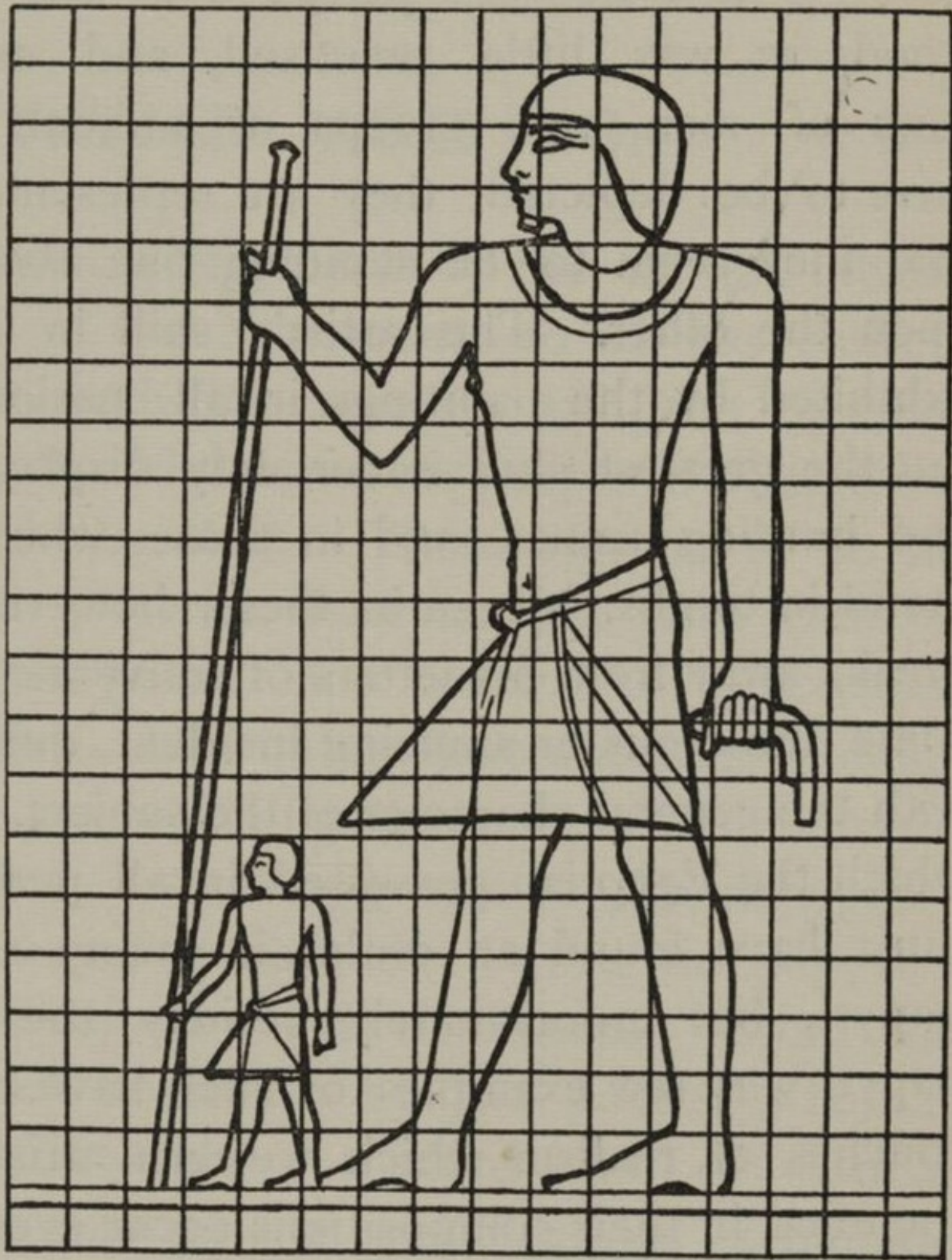
##### **Pictograph**

A record that is made up of symbolic representations.

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## 4. Canon of Proportions

The Palette of Narmer also offers a good example of what came to be known as the **canon of proportions**. These are strict standards of Egyptian design. Figures were typically proportional to the size of their fist, which was a unit of measurement. One of these standards in the Egyptian canon of proportions states that figures must be 18 fists from the top of their heads to the ground. Below is a diagram depicting the canon, or system of proportions, that remained constant in Egyptian art over a period of approximately 3,000 years. It allows an artist to make an exact replica of the same figure in a different size. Notice that the head is in profile, the torso is facing the viewer, and the legs are in profile. This is similar to the twisted perspective discussed in the lesson on prehistoric cave painting.



Canon of proportion.

Egyptian canon of proportions

The standards of body portrayal in a canon of proportions were important to the Egyptians because of the effects they could have on an individual in the afterlife. There's a reason they were codified. Egyptian works of art from this period have a very recognizable quality. It wasn't because they were incapable of rendering a realistic image but because of the meaning associated with the symbolism.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Canon of Proportions**

An Egyptian rule that mandated dimensions and scale.

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## 5. Design Elements and Depiction

Because they were more than just decorative, statues were stiff, rigid, and durable. They needed to survive indefinitely because each was the home of an individual's ka, or soul. Ancient Egyptians used diorite, an extremely hard stone, for ka sculptures, even though it was difficult to carve. This ensured that the sculpture would last for generations with minimal damage. The Sumerians also used diorite for some of their votive imagery.

This is why you see figures such as the sculpture of the Pharaoh Khafra, seen below, who was responsible for the Great Sphinx of Giza, designed with zero space between their appendages and the body.





**Sculpture of the Pharaoh Khafra**

**~2500 BCE (4th dynasty)**

**Diorite (stone)**

For one, it was a depiction of an ideal, more so than an individual. But secondly, arms, legs, and heads were

easy to break, and these design elements ensured they would survive intact.

These are elements that we can see carried over on other sculptures, such as this one of the Pharaoh Menkaure and a queen:







Menkaure and a queen

~2480 BCE (4th dynasty)

Slate (stone)



#### DID YOU KNOW

Menkaure was the successor to Khafra. And what's interesting about this is how the two figures are portrayed. His queen is much less rigid in her depiction. Her arms are rendered in a far more natural, relaxed way, as opposed to Menkaure, who is very stiff. He almost looks like he is carrying invisible suitcases.

The queen's foot is also slightly set back, and she's slightly shorter as compared to Menkaure. He is taller and his foot is positioned further forward. These are elements that help identify her status as less important than that of her king.

As mentioned before, these elements were the result of deliberate stylistic decisions, rather than the limitations of the artists themselves.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here's an example from about this time showing a naturalistic representation of a scribe. Notice how this scribe looks aged, with parts of his body starting to droop and jowls and wrinkles in his face. He also has a kind facial expression, which would not have been the case with sculptures of pharaohs.





Seated scribe

2551–2528 BCE

Limestone (stone)

Why the difference? Well, individuals that ranked lower on the social status scale could be depicted in a more realistic manner.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you began to explore a brief introduction to ancient Egypt. First, you learned about the **period and location of ancient Egypt**. This era extends from about 3100 BCE to 332 BCE, covering almost 3,000 years.

**Ancient Egypt and religion** were also covered in this lesson. Deities were extremely important and frequently incorporated into artwork of this time. The **Palette of Narmer** is one such piece of ceremonial propaganda. Narmer is believed to be the first pharaoh, or king, of an ancient unified Egypt, and this palette describes that story.

Finally, you learned about **design elements and depiction**, and more specifically, the **canon of proportions**, a set of strict standards of Egyptian design. Because they were more than just decorative, statues were stiff, rigid, and durable. They needed to survive indefinitely because each was the home of an individual's ka, or soul.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Canon of Proportions**

An Egyptian rule that mandated dimensions and scale.

### **Dynasty**

A series of rulers from the same family.

### **Hieratic Scale**

A system that represents sizes of things according to importance and based on fixed religious traditions.

### **Horus**

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### **Isis**

Egyptian goddess of fertility, represented as a woman with cow's horns and a solar disk between them, also worshiped in ancient Rome and Greece.

### **Ka**

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### **Nile River**

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### **Osiris**

Egyptian god and judge of the dead, represented as a man partly wrapped as a mummy with a beard and wearing a crown.

### **Pictograph**

A record that is made up of symbolic representations.

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Egyptian sun god, a universal creator, typically represented as a hawk-headed man with a solar disk and uraeus, or cobra, on his head.

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### **Seth**

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