

## LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT



**E**gypt is the gift of the Nile, said the ancient Greek historian Herodotus. The only way the settlements of Egypt could survive was by existing on a narrow strip of land made fertile by the River Nile. The change from fertile soil (the Black Land) to barren desert (the Red Land) was so abrupt that a person could stand with one foot in each. So it's no wonder that the Egyptians worshipped the river itself as a god. The Nile was their provider.

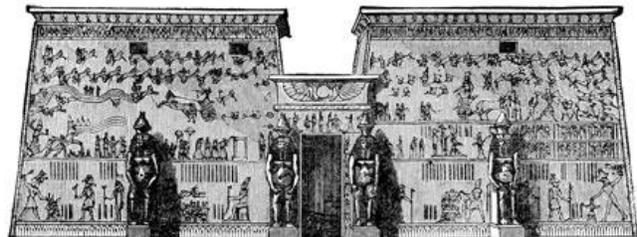
Apart from providing them with two yearly harvests, the Nile was their means of transportation—their ships and canoes sailing up and down its length. The river gave them meat to eat through fish and water fowl. They used ivory gained from the hippopotami

that lived in the river and made papyrus from the reeds that grew on the riverbanks. The river also gave them mud, which without a ready supply of lumber, was how the Egyptians made bricks for their houses.

While the Nile was benevolent, it could just as easily be hostile. It was filled with hippopotami, crocodiles, and deadly currents—all which could mean death to river travelers. The flooding of the Nile was as regular as clockwork, not unpredictable like the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia, yet if the Nile floodwaters reached just a few feet shorter than normal, the amount of fresh silt and water for crops was greatly reduced. Thousands of people starved. Conversely, when floodwaters were a few feet higher, the unwanted water destroyed houses and other buildings. The Nile giveth, and the Nile taketh away.

The desert conditions affected how the Egyptians lived, too. Egyptian men and women applied makeup called kohl to their eyes, which helped protect their eyes from the scorching sun. They oiled their skin to protect it from the dry air. Egyptians also shaved their heads and body hair to avoid lice. Both men and women instead wore decorative wigs to cover their bald heads. Practically, a bald head was more comfortable in the Egyptian heat, but cosmetically wigs became a fashionable status symbol.

In other cultures like Mesopotamia kings were considered to be representatives of the gods, but in Egypt the pharaohs *were* gods. These god-kings ruled on earth with all the heavenly powers of a deity. Since the people revered their pharaohs as gods, their government was a theocracy, a rule based on religious authority. They believed that the pharaoh caused the sun to rise, the Nile to flood, and the crops to grow. These were the responsibilities of the pharaoh along with promoting truth and justice. Egyptians even believed that their



pharaohs continued to rule *after* death. Every person had an eternal life force or *ka*, and the *ka* of the pharaoh continued to take part in the governing of Egypt even after his death. Since pharaohs were thought to live forever, their tombs were even more important than their palaces.

For pharaohs of the Old Kingdom, their resting place after death was an immense structure called a pyramid. What makes these structures even more impressive is that they were built by a people who had not yet discovered the use of the wheel. For centuries later cultures speculated the purpose of the pyramids. Were they granaries or temples? The truth, that they were elaborate tombs, shows the Egyptians' obsession with dead.

The most important Egyptian gods were Osiris, god of the dead, and Ra, the sun god. Every day the Egyptians believed Ra sailed the boat of the sun through the sky and at night passed through the darkness of the underworld, avoiding deadly monsters, only to be miraculously reborn each morning at dawn. The most important goddess was Isis, who represented the ideal mother and wife. In all, Egyptians worshipped more than 2,000 gods and goddesses, and they built huge temples to honor the deities. Often the Egyptians depicted their gods as animals or humans with the heads of animals to highlight certain aspects of their personalities.

The Egyptians devoted a tremendous amount of energy to safeguard that life continued for them even after death. In the underworld they believed they would be judged for their deeds in life. Anubis, the jackal-headed god and guide of the underworld, would weigh each dead person's heart. To win eternal life, the heart could be no heavier than a feather. If the heart tipped the scale, this showed that it was heavy with sin. If this happened, a fierce beast known as the Devourer of Souls would pounce on the impure heart and gobble it up. This beast was Ammit "the Gobbler", a composite animal with the head of a crocodile, the front legs and body of a leopard, and the back legs of a hippopotamus. Those who failed the test would not enter into a hell-like place, but cease to exist—a terrifying thought to the Egyptians. But if the soul passed the test for purity and truth, it would live forever in the beautiful Other World.

People of all classes planned for their burials, so that they might safely reach the Other World. Poor people were simply buried in the earth, but kings and queens built great tombs, such as the pyramids. Royal and elite Egyptians' bodies were preserved by mummification, which involves embalming and drying the corpse to prevent it from decaying. The belief was if the dead person's body was preserved correctly, their *ka* could survive into the next life. Egyptian embalmers were so skillful that modern



archeologists have found mummies that still have hair, skin, and teeth. Some wealthy Egyptians had their pets mummified along with them, so the pets might accompany them in the next life.

Mummification was an elaborate process. First, the embalmers would draw out the corpse's brains through the nostrils with a hook and then discard it as waste. The Egyptians did not understand the function of the brain—viewing it as worthless stuffing—and instead viewed the heart as the human instrument of thought. The heart was carefully preserved and not removed from the body. When the mummy's soul returned to the body after death, it would need its heart intact to do its thinking. After the brain was removed, embalmers made an incision in the corpse's side with a sharp stone and removed all the bowels. Embalmers placed the brain, liver, and other important internal organs of the corpse in Canopic jars, ceremonial, decorative containers. After the organs were removed, the embalmers filled the corpse's belly with myrrh and other perfumes and sewed it up. They soaked the body in mineral salt for seventy days and then wrapped the whole body in cloth bandages. Finally, they placed a mummy mask on the corpse. For some people these were only paper, but for the pharaohs they would often be gold.

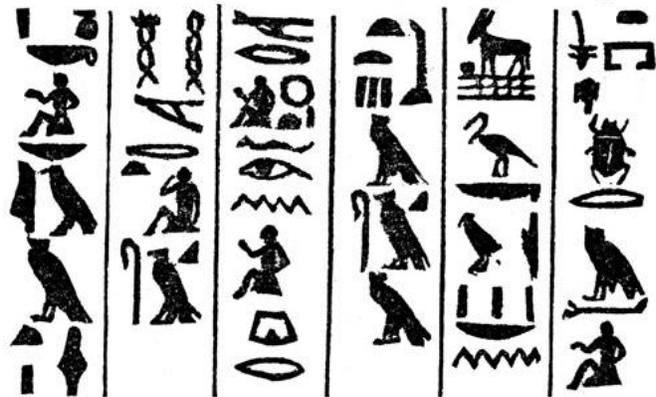
After attendants placed the mummy into a coffin, or decorated sarcophagus, they laid it in a tomb, which was filled with items the person might use in the afterlife, such as clothing, food, cosmetics, or jewelry. Many Egyptians purchased scrolls that contained hymns, prayers, and magic spells intended to guide the soul to the afterlife. This collection of texts is known as the *Book of the Dead*.

The Egyptians believed in the mystical power of names. In order to create something, the Egyptians said, you needed to name it. Naming something gave it a life force or *ka*. The Egyptians believed if they learned the true name of their enemies, they could use this knowledge against them by writing the person's name into a curse and writing it onto a clay bowl or statue that would be ritualistically smashed.

One of the reasons Egyptian culture is so fascinating is that it has its own unique style. The vast deserts on either side of the Nile isolated the Egyptians from frequent contact with other cultures. This both protected them by preventing enemy armies from reaching them safely and allowing them freedom from foreign influences to develop a distinctive culture.

The development of writing was one of the keys of Egypt's growth. Egyptian scribes developed a writing system called hieroglyphics, wherein a picture stood for an idea. Although hieroglyphics were at first carved into stones, the Egyptians soon invented a better writing surface: papyrus reeds. These grew in the marshy delta. The Egyptians split the reeds into narrow strips, placed them crosswise in two layers, dampened them, and then pressed them. As the papyrus dried, the plant's sap glued the strips together into a paper-like sheet.

Mathematics advanced in Egypt, too. Since the Egyptians needed to determine when a year had passed between Nile floodings, they discovered that each year consisted of 365 days. They divided the year into twelve months of thirty days each and added five days for holidays and



feasting. This calendar was so accurate that it fell short of the true solar year by only six hours. In addition, advanced mathematics and geometry helped the Egyptians complete their monumental building projects.

Egyptian medicine was also famous in the ancient world. Egyptian doctors knew how to check a person's heart rate by feeling for a pulse in different parts of the body. They set broken bones with splints and had effective treatments for wounds and fevers. They also used surgery to treat some conditions.

For thousands of years Egypt developed and maintained its unique culture. To this day the Egyptians, those pharaohs of the Nile, still have the power to mystify and mesmerize.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

---

1. What do you find most interesting about Egyptian culture? Explain.
2. What would be dangerous about believing your pharaoh was actually a god?
3. How does Egyptian culture seem to be obsessed with death?