

# Ancient Egypt

The civilisation of ancient Egypt began in oases on the banks of the River Nile in the north-east African desert. The Nile provided Egypt's all-important floodplain for growing crops, and also functioned as a major travel and trade route.

People began to farm the Nile Valley from as early as the sixth millennium BC. In the fourth millennium BC, early farming villages developed into Egypt's first towns. Egypt was united under one ruler in around 3000 BC, then ruled by pharaohs for the next three thousand years. There were three main periods of the pharaohs' rule, referred to as the Old Kingdom (2628–2181 BC), the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC) and the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC).

The tremendous achievements of the ancient Egyptians are preserved in their art and monuments, in particular the mighty pyramids, temples and rock tombs. The afterlife was a preoccupation of the Egyptians and the wealthy elite followed elaborate funerary rites in the hope of being granted eternal life.

The Egyptian people believed that only the gods could keep order in this world, and that the pharaoh was a living representation of the gods. He ran the country through an organised system of government. Everyone paid taxes, either in goods or by working for the government, often on one of the pharaoh's major building projects.

During the New Kingdom, Egypt became the wealthiest, most powerful country of the ancient world. Although its strength then waned, its culture continued, even under foreign invaders, including the Greeks and Romans. When the Roman Empire officially became Christian in AD 380 it ordered the Egyptian temples to close, marking an end to ancient Egypt.

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### **13: Gilded outer coffin of Henutmehyt**

*Around 1250 BC*

Henutmehyt was a priestess from the Egyptian city of Thebes and it is clear from her lavish burial that she was extremely wealthy and highly regarded. Tombs and coffins were only ever for the rich; the poor were simply buried in the sand. Henutmehyt's body was mummified, a lengthy process for preservation that involved internal organs being removed and the body being dried out and wrapped in special bandages. Her mummy was then placed in a gold-leafed inner coffin inside this decorative outer coffin. Both coffins depict idealised versions of the priestess, designed to provide her spirit with a substitute body should her mummified body perish.

### **14: Miniature broad collar**

*332–222 BC*

The Egyptians took great pride in

their appearance, wearing fine linen, elaborate hairstyles and colourful, striking jewellery. This miniature collar, made of gold and semi-precious stones, is likely to have been made as an offering to the gods. Religious offerings were a daily ritual in ancient Egypt. Ordinary people would make small offerings to shrines in their own homes and priests would make three food offerings a day to the statues in their temples. The pharaoh, as supreme priest of all temples, would make the most important offerings of all.

### **15: Inlay depicting 'Horus of Gold'**

*Fourth century BC*

This inlay is one of a group found at the site of the ancient city of Hermopolis. It is thought they formed a large inscription, listing the names of a king. The written word was deemed extremely powerful by the Egyptians and it was beautifully sculpted on monuments, in picture writing known

as hieroglyphs. The Egyptians called this writing 'the words of the gods'. Egyptian kings chose their names very carefully and these names were steeped in meaning. This hieroglyph depicts the name 'Horus of Gold'. The falcon god Horus was closely associated with the Egyptian pharaohs.

### **16: Ram's head amulet**

*712–664 BC*

This amulet comes from the period when Egypt was ruled by the Kushite kings. The kingdom of Kush was in Nubia, to the south of Egypt. During the 25th Dynasty, the Kushites ruled Egypt for around a hundred years. Images of Kushite pharaohs show them wearing rams' head amulets similar to this one. The ancient Egyptians associated the ram with fertility and with the god Amun, who had been adopted as the king of gods during the Middle Kingdom. Amulets were worn to bring good fortune and to ward off evil.

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**17: Painted wooden canopic jars***Around 700 BC*

During mummification, the intestines, stomach, lungs and liver were removed, preserved, then stored in special containers called canopic jars. It was traditional for the stoppers of the jars to represent the four sons of the god Horus, with the heads of a baboon, a jackal, a falcon and a human. Later the preserved internal organs were stored inside the body. Although the canopic jars were no longer needed, they continued to be included as important elements for a good burial.

**18: Wooden model of bakers***Around 1900 BC*

Bread was a staple part of every Egyptian's diet. Farmers grew wheat on the fertile land along the River Nile. It was ground into flour, then mixed with water and baked, both on a small scale at home and on a more industrial scale to feed workers. Models like this one were placed in tombs to represent the activities essential to everyday life – activities that were expected to be necessary in the next life too.

**19: Painted wooden model of a harp***1550–1069 BC*

This tomb model is another example of an object taken to the grave for use in the next life. Wall paintings show music and dancing as part of Egyptian banquet scenes. Musicians and entertainers were both male and female. In general, Egyptian women had more freedom than those in other ancient civilisations. Their main role was still to run the household and have children, but some also had jobs, ran businesses and owned property.

**20: Bust of Queen Nefertiti***Around 1340 BC*

Nefertiti was the wife of Akhenaten, the pharaoh who brought about a shocking change in Egypt by rejecting the worship of Amun and replacing him with Aten, the god of the sun disk. Nefertiti was a prominent queen, ruling alongside her husband and playing an active role in his religious reforms. Her name translates as 'a beautiful woman has come' and her beauty is evident in this bust. It was found in the ruins of a sculptor's

workshop in Amarna, the new capital city founded by Akhenaten. There are numerous reliefs and statues of Nefertiti and this bust would have served as a model for artists to copy.

**21: Page from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer***Around 1300 BC*

This scene is from a Book of the Dead, about the burial of a royal scribe, Hunefer. These books contained beautifully illustrated instructions on how to perform a proper burial and achieve a safe passage to the next life. They were made for people of high rank and placed in their tombs. This scene shows priests performing rituals over Hunefer's mummified body while his wife and daughter mourn. Funerary texts were only made for people of high rank. Scribes were in this category because the art of writing was so highly valued. The book is painted on papyrus, the world's first paper-like material, which was made from strips of papyrus reed.

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