Chapter 3: Egypt Under the Pharaohs
Religion and the divine were present and influential in all aspects of the ancient Egyptians’ culture.

- Most of what we know today about ancient Egypt comes from tombs and funerary art because they were intended to serve the deceased forever in the afterlife. For such structures and art forms, the Egyptians used imperishable materials to ensure that their creations would last. Tombs were built as eternal homes for the dead.
- The Pharaohs, or kings, were equally immortal as the gods themselves – the Pharaohs were more like god-kings.
- The art and architecture produced by the ancient Egyptians reflects the order that was divinely established in Egypt.

Written sources of knowledge and the **Rosetta Stone**

- The Rosetta Stone was discovered by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799.
- On it are three sections of inscriptions in three different languages: Greek, demotic (late Egyptian), and **hieroglyphics** (the ancient Egyptian’s form of writing).
- The stone has served as a sort of key for deciphering hieroglyphics and ancient Egyptian documents and inscriptions.
- Jean-Francois Champollion determined that hieroglyphics were actually signs of a once-spoken language and not just pictographs.
Predynastic Period
Palette of King Narmer

Predynastic period – Egypt was divided geographically and politically
• Upper Egypt encompassed the southern portion of Egypt/the upstream part of the Nile Valley.
• Lower Egypt encompassed the northern portion of Egypt and the Nile Delta islands.
• (The Nile River flows south to north, which gives the two regions their names.)

The Predynastic period ended with the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, which is commemorated in the Palette of King Narmer.

Narmer’s image and name appears on the ceremonial palette (stone slab with circular depression).

On it are labeled historical reliefs that commemorate and record the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Though the palette presents the unification as a single event, scholars now believe that it took place over centuries.

It exists as a document that marks the transition from the prehistorical and historical period in Egypt.

Fig. 3-3. Palette of King Narmer (back and from) Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, ca. 3000-2920 BCE. Slate, 2’ 1” high.
Predynastic Period
Palette of King Narmer

Back side (left)
- Narmer wears the white crown of Upper Egypt.
- The image of Narmer slaying an enemy became the standard formula for visually representing the triumph of the Egyptian god-kings over their enemies.
- The falcon symbolizes Horus and acts as the king’s protector.
- The man-headed hieroglyph with papyrus plants growing from it represents Lower Egypt, and Horus has captured it.

Front side (right)
- The circular depression that would hold eye make-up in an ordinary palette is formed by the elongated and twisted necks of two felines.
- In the top register, Narmer wears the red crown of Lower Egypt and looks at the bodies of his enemies.
- The bull knocking down a rebellious city in the lower register symbolizes the king’s superhuman strength.

Fig. 3-3. Palette of King Narmer (back and from)
Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, ca. 3000-2920 BCE.
Slate, 2’ 1” high.
The goal of the artist
- To characterize the king as supreme and solely responsible for the triumph over the enemy
- (Not to record a specific historical event)
- Reflects the state policy that established the pharaoh as divine ruler

The narratives were composed within registers. The horizontal lines that define the registers serve as ground lines. This became the norm in Egyptian art.

The figure representation in the reliefs became the model, or canon, for figure representation that characterized most of Egyptian art for thousands of years.

Narmer is shown in **composite view** (head, legs, and arms in profile; front views of eye and torso). This became the standard in Egyptian art.

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Fig. 3-3. Palette of King Narmer (back and from)
Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, ca. 3000-2920 BCE.
Slate, 2’ 1” high.
Mummification and Immortality: the Ka and the Afterlife

The ancient Egyptians did not think of the body as separate from the soul. They believed a person had a **ka** – a life force, or a kind of other self. The Egyptians believed that the ka could live on in the body after the body had died, but the body had to be mostly intact. The practice of mummification stemmed from this belief.

Beliefs about the ka living on in the afterlife meant that the ka would need all necessities and comforts that the deceased enjoyed while alive. Items such as clothing, utensils, and furniture were placed in tombs, and meals were brought for the ka.

The ka statue, or portrait statue of the deceased, stood in the tomb as a substitute home for the ka in case the mummy disintegrated. These statues were, of course, made of imperishable materials so that they could serve forever in the afterlife.

Walls of tombs were decorated with scenes of everyday activities. These also served to continue the life of the deceased into the afterlife.

All of these practices were done in hopes of ensuring immortality.
Early Dynastic Periods
Mastaba

Egyptian tombs provide the most information about ancient Egypt.

The standard tomb type in early Egypt was the **mastaba** – a rectangular brick or stone structure with sloping sides built over a burial chamber. It almost looks like a pyramid that has been sliced horizontally, leaving a flat surface rather than a point.

![Mastaba Diagram]

The underground burial chambers and rooms housed a portrait stature of the deceased and offerings. The interior walls were decorated with scenes from daily life.

The chapel had a false door through which the **ka** (or life force) could leave the tomb and partake in meals placed on the offering table.

![Mastaba Sections]

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Fig. 3-4. Section (top), plan (center), and restored view (bottom) of typical Egyptian mastaba tombs.
Djoser (r. 2630-2611 BCE) ruled during the Third Dynasty.

Imhotep
- Builder, chancellor, and high priest of the sun god for King Djoser
- First artist whose name is recorded in history

Stepped pyramid of Djoser
- Begun as a large mastaba; enlarged into a stepped pyramid
- Had a dual function: (1) to protect the mummified king and his possessions; (2) to symbolize the king’s absolute power

The mortuary precinct/funerary complex of Djoser
- Surrounded by protective walls that regulated access
- Included a funerary temple for worship of the deified king

Fig. 3-5. Imhotep, Stepped Pyramid and mortuary precinct of Djoser, Saqqara, Egypt, Third Dynasty, ca. 2630-2611 BCE.
The Old Kingdom
Great Pyramids, Gizeh

The pyramids stood as symbols of the sun and the sun god Re for the ancient Egyptians.

The sloping sides of the pyramids represent the rays of the sun that acted as ramps the pharaohs used to ascend to the heavens after their death and rebirth.

Fig. 3-8. Great Pyramids, Gizeh, Egypt, Fourth Dynasty. From Bottom:
Pyramid of Menkaure, ca. 2490-2472 BCE;
Pyramid of Khafre, ca. 2520-2494 BCE;
Pyramid of Khufu, ca. 2551-2528 BCE.
The Old Kingdom
Great Pyramids, Gizeh

1. Silhouette with original facing stone
2. Thieves’ tunnels
3. Entrance
4. Grand gallery
5. King’s chamber
6. So-called Queen’s chamber
7. False tomb chamber
8. Relieving blocks
9. Airshafts(?)

Fig. 3-9. Section of the Pyramid of Khufu, Gizeh, Egypt, Fourth Dynasty, ca. 2551-2528 BCE.
The Old Kingdom
Great Pyramids, Gizeh

1. Pyramid of Menkaure
2. Pyramid of Khafre
3. Mortuary temple of Khafre
4. Causeway
5. Great Sphinx
6. Valley temple of Khafre
7. Pyramid of Khufu
8. Pyramids of the royal family and mastabas of nobles

Fig. 3-10. Model of the Fourth Dynasty pyramid complex, Gizeh, Egypt.
Khafre is represented rigidly posed in eternal stillness – a composition appropriate for the afterlife. The statue is from Kahre’s pyramid complex. The artist used a very hard, imperishable stone – diorite – to create the statue.

The divine ruler has a flawless body with ideal proportions – an appropriate style for a god-king.

The purpose of pharaonic portraiture was to represent the pharaoh’s divine nature, rather than record his individual features.

Fig. 3-12. Khafre enthroned, from Gizeh, Egypt, Fourth Dynasty, ca. 2520-2494 BCE. Diorite, 5’ 6” high.
In tomb decorations, images of agriculture and hunting were associated with making preparations for the ka in the afterlife.

Scenes of successful hunts symbolized triumph over evil.

Ti is represented in the traditional canon for figure representation (compare to the Palette of King Narmer).

Ti is not active, but rather he simply observes life like his ka. He is an ideal, eternal figure.

Fig. 3-15. Ti watching a hippopotamus hunt, relief in the mastaba of Ti, Saqqara, Egypt, Fifth Dynasty, ca. 2450-2350 BCE. Painted limestone, 4’ high.
The New Kingdom
Hatshepsut’s Portraits

Hatshepsut ruled as a female pharaoh – the title of a king.

She wears the male pharaoh regalia – the false beard and the nemes headdress. Her body is also represented as anatomically male.

Fig. 3-21. Hatshepsut with offering jars, from the upper court of her mortuary temple, Deir el-Bahri, Egypt, 18th Dynasty, ca. 1473-1458 BCE. Red granite, 8’ 6” high.
Ramses II proclaimed his greatness with the colossal portraits of himself on the façade of the temple. The portraits are 65 feet tall seated.

Colossal portraits of Ramses II also line the interior hall of the temple.

Fig. 3-22. Façade of the Temple of Ramses II, Abu Simbel, Egypt, 19th Dynasty, ca. 1290-1224 BCE. Sandstone, colossi 65’ high.
The New Kingdom
Temple of Amen-Re, Karnak

The architects of the temple of Amen-Re at Karnak raised the central section of the roof to create a clerestory, which served to illuminate the interior of the temple.

The clerestory is an Egyptian innovation.

Fig. 3-25. Hypostyle hall, temple of Amen-Re, Karnak, Egypt, 19th Dynasty, ca. 1290-1224 BCE.
The interior of the temple of Amen-Re at Karnak is a **hypostyle hall**: an open court with columns on two or more sides.

The columns of the hall structurally supported the roof, what was carried on lintels.
A fresco painting from the tomb of Nebamun depicting him hunting

When compared to the frescoes from the tomb of Ti (Fig. 3-15), it is clear the representation of Nabmun shows more movement.

The technique used was fresco secco, or dry fresco, by which pigment is painted onto dry plaster. The colors do not bind with the dry plaster, so the technique is not as durable as true/buon fresco.
Four noblewomen are watching and participating in a musical dance; two figures dance fluidly at a banquet.

The painting is evidence that New Kingdom artists did not always follow the traditional standards for figure representation. Two of the seated women are represented in traditional composite view, but the other two are frontal to the viewer. All of the figures show movement. The style is more relaxed here.
Mid-14th century BCE → the pharaoh Amenhotep IV did away with the worship of most of the Egyptian gods in favor of Aton, who was identified by the sun disk. The pharaoh changed his name to Akhenaton to reflect the god's name. The style of art changed drastically during Akhenaton’s rule (1353-1335 BCE).

The portrait here, while it retains the traditional frontal pose, is characterized by curving lines, an effeminate and aging body (instead of ideal), and a long face. These are the main features of figure representation during the Amarna Period.

It has been hypothesized that Akhenaton’s artists deliberately established a new style in reaction against the traditional style and canon.

Fig. 3-30. Akhenaton, from the temple of Aton, Karnak, Egypt, 18th Dynasty, ca. 1353-1335 BCE. Sandstone, 13’ high.
An example of a sunken relief

The royal family (Akhenaton, Nefertiti, and their three daughters) interact in an informal and intimate representation, which was unprecedented in Egyptian art. The sun disk, Aton, blesses them with his rays.

Characteristic of art from the Amarna Period, the figures are defined by curving lines, and the figures have rounded bellies.
The Post-Amarna Period
Scroll of Hu-Nefer

Bodies were frequently buried with a so-called Book of the Dead, which contained spells and prayers meant to help the deceased in his journey into the afterlife. The spells and prayers as well as scenes of the deceased making his journey were painted on a papyrus scroll.

The scroll below is from the tomb of Hu-Nefer. The scene depicts his last judgment in the Underworld.

Fig. 3-36. Last judgment of Hu-Nefer, from his tomb at Themes, Egypt, 19th Dynasty, ca. 1290-1280 BCE. Painted papyrus scroll, 1’ 6” high.