

The World of Ancient Egypt

By Hairani Hassan-Joshi



Ancient Egypt was a civilisation in eastern North Africa, concentrated along the lower reaches of the Nile River in what is now the modern nation of Egypt. The civilisation began around 3150 BCE with the political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under the first pharaoh.

The civilisation of ancient Egypt adapted well to the conditions of the Nile River Valley. Controlled irrigation of the fertile valley produced surplus crops, which fuelled social development and culture. The administration could sponsor mineral exploitation, the development of an independent writing system, the organisation of construction and agricultural projects, trade with surrounding regions and a powerful military. Organising these activities was a bureaucracy of elite scribes, religious leaders and administrators under the reign of a pharaoh, who ensured the cooperation and unity of the Egyptian people through an elaborate system of religious beliefs.

Egyptians believed that all aspects of life were controlled by supernatural powers. One important religious concept was the creation of the universe. This was an act of regeneration, represented by the yearly flooding of the Nile. Each day was also considered a repetition of the act of creation. As the sun – represented by Atum – travelled across the sky to rise and set and begin the cycle again, so the Egyptians felt assured that the created order of their world was eternal and ongoing.

The ancient Egyptian religion was concerned with interactions between people and their gods, the ethics of dealing with others and the performance of spiritual duties. The universe was believed to work according to a strict eternal law called *ma'at* (balance). The site of ritual worship usually consists of a simple, enclosed structure. This demarcation underscores the separation of the sacral from the profane. At this site, which the gods could claim as their 'home', as it were, the divine world comes into contact with the human world.

During the Pre-dynastic Period, the chief, and later the king, fulfilled the role of mediator between the gods and the people. Kingship represented one of the keystones of ancient Egyptian culture. Upon his accession to the throne the king or pharaoh became 'a human in the role of a god', the successor on earth of the god Horus. The individual, temporal person of the ruler and the transcending, idealised being from the ideology were united within him. The pharaoh thus embodied a dual nature, both human and divine.

With Egypt entrusted to his care by the gods, the pharaoh had to nourish and protect his country from hunger, poverty and violence. He was also expected to satisfy the gods with divine offerings and bring funerary offerings for the dead. The king had to fulfil the needs of the cult and ensure the construction of cult buildings.

The ancient Egyptians' belief in the possibility of attaining eternal life after death brought about a meticulous and systematic approach towards the preservation and maintenance of their funerary cult. As the treatment of the dead in ancient Egypt was designed to prepare and

*Mummy of Nes-Khons in cartonnage cover
3rd Intermediate Period, 25th Dynasty
760–656 BCE
Probably Thebes, Upper Egypt*





Thoth as an ibis
Wood, silver, stucco, glass
Late Period, 600–500 BCE
Origin unknown

equip the deceased for all time, the materials favoured for making burial items or building tombs were those that would last, particularly stone and precious metal. The body was mummified for the same reasons, so it would last for eternity.

Death was thus regarded not as the end of human existence, but as a necessary transition to a new state of being. All the Egyptians' funerary preparations, including mummification, the construction of tombs and the provision of offerings, were directed to this end, enabling the dead to achieve *akh* – the ideal state of immortality where one dwells eternally in the realm of the gods.

Archaeologists today are still making important discoveries about ancient Egypt, and the scientific study of royal mummies is shedding new light on the genealogy of the pharaohs. The ongoing deciphering of hieroglyphic writings and research on the life of peasants are also answering many questions related to the evolution of Egyptian culture.

Ancient Egypt left a lasting legacy: its art and architecture were copied and antiquities paraded around the world, and monumental ruins have inspired the imaginations of tourists and writers for centuries.

A newfound respect for antiquities and excavations in the early modern period has led to the scientific investigation of Egyptian civilisation and a greater appreciation of its cultural legacy for Egypt and the world.



Sphinx of Amenhotep III
Limestone
New Kingdom, 1390–1352 BCE
Origin unknown

Quest for Immortality – The World of Ancient Egypt

Presented by National Museum of Singapore, in cooperation with Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Egyptian and Near Eastern Collection
On view through 4 April
10:00 am – 6:00 pm, daily
Exhibition Galleries, Basement

Quest for Immortality – The World of Ancient Egypt offers an insight to the ancient Egyptians' attitude to life and the afterlife, and the preparations they made to ensure their transition from earthly existence to immortality. Discover the Egyptians' means of equipping the dead – through mummification, provision of sustenance, magic and ritual – and explore the evolution of their burial rites as well as the changing relationship between man and ritual through time.

With 230 artefacts spanning from 4000 BCE to 950 CE, this exhibition places tomb objects in their social, religious and artistic context, demonstrating the diversity and adaptability of a civilisation that has prevailed both in time and space.

Hairani Hassan-Joshi is a graduate in Political Science and Sociology from the National University of Singapore, with eight years of curatorial experience. Hairani is responsible for curating international exhibitions at the National Museum of Singapore. Previously, Hairani worked with the Asian Civilisations Museum, where she played an integral role in the installation of the permanent West Asia/Islamic Galleries.

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Canopic jars
Calcite, painted
New Kingdom, 19th–20th Dynasty, 1295–1069 BCE
Origin unknown