

## From Mittler, *Art in Focus*

Sometime around 5000 B.C., perhaps seeking the animals they depended upon for food, prehistoric hunters and their families came upon and settled in the fertile valley of the Nile River (see Figure 7.2). As far as experts can tell, these people came from western Asia. Since there is no evidence that they moved on or were somehow destroyed, they are regarded as the direct ancestors of most Egyptian peoples. The Nile River valley in which they settled was about 750 miles (1207 km) long, but measured no more than about 31 miles (50 km) at its widest point. In some places, it was not much more than 10 miles (16 km) wide. It was lined on both sides by cliffs ranging in height from around 300 to 1000 feet (100 to 300 m). Beyond these cliffs was nothing but desert.

### Early Inhabitants Along the Nile

Each summer the Nile River would flood its banks and deposit layers of fertile soil. This soil had been carried for thousands of miles (kilometers) from the African interior. In some places, these rich soil deposits reached a depth of more than 30 feet (9 m). In this fertile environment, people gradually changed from food gatherers to food producers. Discovering that the wild vegetables and grains they gathered grew from seeds, they began to gather these seeds and plant them in the fertile soil of the valley. This soil was so productive that as many as three crops could be raised in a single year on the same land.

The people continued to hunt animals for food, but came to rely more and more on the animals they raised themselves. This gave them a decided advantage over their ancestors. They were no longer entirely dependent upon the game they hunted for survival. Because they no longer had to move from one location to another in search of game, they could give up the practice of living temporarily in caves. Instead, they began to build more permanent houses of mud, wood, and reeds.

This settled existence brought about an increase in population and led to the growth of villages and towns. Some towns grew so strong that they took control of neighboring villages and, in this way, formed kingdoms. As the prehistoric period came to a close, there were only two large kingdoms in Egypt. One of these was Lower Egypt, which included the fan-shaped delta region at the mouth of the Nile. The other was Upper Egypt, which was the valley carved in the desert by the river (see Figure 7.2).

Thus, an Egyptian civilization grew up along the banks of the Nile more than three thousand years before the birth of Christ. It continued in existence for nearly three thousand years. During that period, Egypt became a thriving nation in which a pharaoh, or *king*, ruled with complete authority. Agriculture and trade grew; art flourished; and majestic monuments and temples were constructed.

### The Three Major Periods of Egyptian History

It is customary to divide the long history of Egypt into three periods: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom, or Empire. These kingdoms are further divided into dynasties. A dynasty was *a period during which a single family provided a succession of rulers*.

One reign ended and another began with the death of a pharaoh and the crowning of a successor from the same royal family. For this reason, every precaution was taken to keep the blood of the royal family pure. One of these precautions was to forbid the pharaoh to marry outside of the immediate family.

#### The Old Kingdom

The earliest dynastic period began around 3100 B.C. when Upper and Lower Egypt were united by a powerful pharaoh named Menes. Menes established his capital at Memphis and founded the first of the thirty-one Egyptian dynasties. The Old Kingdom dates from the start of the third of these dynasties, in about 2686 B.C. It ended about five hundred years later. The end came when the strong centralized government established by the pharaohs was weakened by the rise of a group of independent nobles. These nobles split the country into small states. Soon civil war and disorder broke out between these states, and the authority of the reigning pharaoh collapsed.

After a long period of turmoil, the nobles in Thebes, a city on the upper Nile, were able to gain control of the country. They managed to unify Egypt once again into a single state, and order was restored to their troubled land. The success of these nobles marked the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, an approximately 250-year period from around 2050 to 1800 B.C.

## The Middle Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom was a time of law and order and prosperity in Egypt. This was true even though the pharaoh, while still the supreme head, was not as powerful as pharaohs had been during the Old Kingdom. Then, around 1800 B.C., Egypt was overrun for the first time by foreign invaders. The Hyksos from western Asia, using horses and chariots, swept across the country. They easily defeated the Egyptians, who were fighting on foot. The Hyksos inhabited Lower Egypt and for two hundred years forced the Egyptian people to pay them tribute. Finally, the Egyptians, having learned how to use horses and chariots from the Hyksos, drove the invaders from their country and restored independence.

## The New Kingdom

The third and most brilliant period of Egyptian history is known as the New Kingdom, or Empire, and began in 1570 B.C. Warrior pharaohs used their knowledge of horses and chariots to extend Egypt's rule over neighboring nations. The greatest of these warrior pharaohs was Thutmose III. He reigned for fifty-four years and was such a great military leader that he is often referred to as the Napoleon of Egypt.

Under a later pharaoh, Amenhotep III, the New Kingdom reached the peak of its power and influence. Thebes, the royal capital, became the most magnificent city in the world. But Amenhotep's son and heir, Amenhotep IV, broke suddenly with tradition. He tried to bring about changes in Egyptian religion, which for centuries had recognized many different gods. Amenhotep IV moved the capital from Thebes to Tell el Amarna where he established Aton, symbolized by the sun disk, as the one supreme god. In honor of his god, Amenhotep changed his name to Ikhnaton (also spelled Akhenaton), which meant "It is well with Aton." Unfortunately, while Ikhnaton was absorbed in his new religion, Egypt's enemies began to whittle away pieces of the once-mighty nation.

Ikhnaton's new religion did not survive after his death. Tell el-Amarna was destroyed, the capital was returned to Thebes, and the old religion was restored. Other pharaohs after Ikhnaton tried to recapture the glories of the past. However, Egypt's long chapter in history was coming to an end. In 332 B.C. Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great of Macedonia, bringing the New Kingdom to a close. There followed several centuries of Hellenistic rule. Finally, in 30 B.C., Egypt was made a province of Rome.

The greatness of ancient Egypt has not been forgotten over the centuries. Works of art of all kinds remain. They range from huge pyramids and tombs to skillfully formed stone statues, carved and painted reliefs, and wall paintings. These and other treasures remain as fascinating reminders of the magnificent civilization that flourished on the banks of the Nile some four thousand years ago.

## The Influence of Religion

Egyptian religion placed great importance on the resurrection of the soul and eternal life in a spirit world after death. The Egyptians believed that the soul, or *ka*, as it was called, came into being with the body and remained in the body until death. At death, the *ka* would leave the body for a time. However, eventually it would return and unite with the body again for the journey to the next world and immortality. If the body were lost or destroyed, the *ka* would be forced to spend eternity in aimless wandering. For this reason, the Egyptians went to great lengths to preserve and protect the body after death. Following a complicated embalming process, the body was wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in a fortress-like tomb where it would be safe until the *ka*'s return. Thus, a strong tomb was a kind of insurance against final death.

The most impressive tomb was built for the most important person in Egyptian society, the pharaoh. The pharaoh was not only a king, but, in the eyes of the people, he was also a god. When he died, the pharaoh was expected to join other gods, including Re, the sun god; Osiris, the god of the Nile and ruler of the underworld; and Isis, the great mother god. The pyramid was built to house and protect the body of the pharaoh and the treasures he would take with him from this

world to the next. His body was sealed in a **sarcophagus**, a stone coffin. It was then placed in a burial chamber located in the very center of the pyramid. Dead-end passages and false burial chambers were added to the building. These were meant to confuse tomb robbers and enemies who might try to destroy the pharaoh's body. For an Egyptian, the destruction of the body was the most horrible form of vengeance.

### Evolution of the Pyramid Shape

Probably the now-familiar pyramid shape developed gradually over a long period of time. Originally, the Egyptians buried their dead in hidden pits and piled sand and stone over the top. Later this practice changed, and they began to use sun-dried bricks to build mastabas. A **mastaba** is a low, flat tomb. These rectangular tombs had sloping sides and contained a chapel and a false burial chamber in addition to the true one hidden deep inside. In time, several mastabas of diminishing size were stacked on

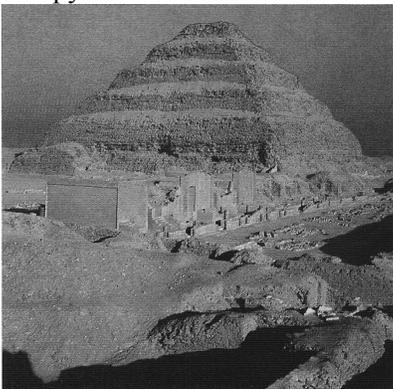


Figure 7.4 Step Pyramid of King Zoser. Saqqara. Egypt. c. 2750 B.C.

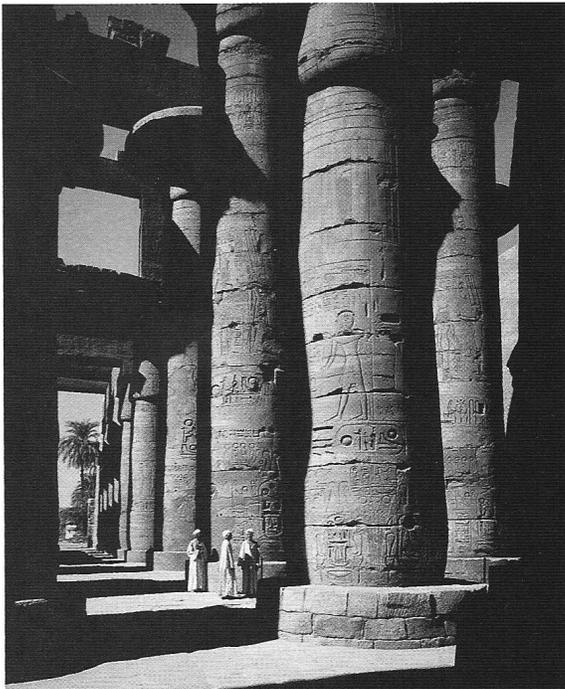
top of each other to form a step pyramid (Figure 7.4). Finally, they were built without steps, and a point was added to the top. With this, the true pyramid form was completed.

Thousands and thousands of paid workers and slaves toiled for decades to build a single pyramid. Limestone was quarried and dragged to the construction site and then carefully fitted into place. How the Egyptians managed to lift and fit these huge blocks of stone, each averaging 2.5 tons (2.3 metric tons), into place remains unclear. Some scholars believe that the stones may have been dragged up ramps of earth and sand that were raised with each level of the structure. They believe that when finished, the pyramid was almost completely covered with sand. The final task, then, was to remove this sand, exposing the finished structure for the first time.

By the time of the Middle Kingdom, the weakened position of the pharaohs and the threat of invasion made large-scale structures such as the pyramid impractical. Many small pyramids and mastabas may have been built during this period. However, these were probably made of mud bricks which soon crumbled and disappeared. More permanent tombs prepared for the pharaoh were cut into the rock cliffs of a valley across the Nile from the capital city of Thebes.

## The Temples

If the pyramids are evidence of the skill of Old Kingdom builders, then the architects of the New Kingdom could point to the great temples they constructed as proof of their own genius. The practice of burying pharaohs and nobles in tombs hidden in the cliffs west of the Nile continued throughout the New Kingdom. Meanwhile, architects took on more important tasks. Temples were erected along the eastern banks of the river near Thebes, and these became more and more elaborate. Each of these temples was built by command of a pharaoh and was dedicated to the pharaoh's favorite god or gods. When the pharaoh died, the temple became a funeral chapel where people could bring offerings for the pharaoh's ka.



Posts and lintels were used to support the heavy stone slabs of the ceiling and to form the openings for windows and doors.

Figure 7.6 Hypostyle Hall, Temple at Amon-Re, Karnak, Egypt. c. 1280 B.C.

Often, a temple built to honor a particular god was enlarged by several pharaohs until it reached tremendous proportions. The ruins of the Temple of Amon-Re at Karnak (Figure 7.6), dedicated to the all-powerful chief god of Thebes, will give you an idea of what these gigantic structures must have looked like.

The approach to the Temple of Amon-Re was a wide avenue which led directly up to the massive sloping front of the structure. A great doorway flanked by **obelisks**, *tall, four-sided, pointed stone shafts*, statues of the pharaoh, and huge banners opened onto an uncovered courtyard. Directly across from this courtyard was the entry to the great hall, perhaps the largest ever built. This hall was filled with massive stone columns, the tallest reaching a height of nearly 70 feet (21 m). Beyond this hall was the sanctuary, the small, dark, and mysterious chamber where only the pharaoh and certain priests were allowed to enter.

Walking from the courtyard to the sanctuary at Karnak, you would move gradually from spacious, bright, warm areas to those that were smaller, darker, and cooler. No doubt this created the impression that you were leaving the real world behind and, with each step, were moving nearer and nearer to another, spiritual world beyond.

## From Janson's *History of Art*

### THE OLD KINGDOM

Egyptian civilization has long been regarded as the most rigid and conservative ever. Plato said that Egyptian art had not changed in 10,000 years. Perhaps "enduring" and "continuous" are better terms for it, although at first glance all Egyptian art between 3000 and 500 B.C. does tend to have a certain sameness. There is a kernel of truth in this: the basic pattern of Egyptian institutions, beliefs, and artistic ideas was formed during the first few centuries of that vast span of time and kept reasserting itself until the very end. We shall see, however, that over the years this basic pattern went through ever more severe crises that challenged its ability to survive. Had it been as inflexible as supposed, it would have succumbed long before it finally did. Egyptian art alternates between conservatism and innovation, but is never static. Some of its great achievements had a decisive influence on Greek and Roman art, and thus we can still feel ourselves linked to the Egypt of 5,000 years ago by a continuous, living tradition.

**DYNASTIES.** The history of Egypt is divided into dynasties of rulers, in accordance with ancient Egyptian practice, beginning with the First Dynasty shortly after 3000 B.C. (The dates of the earliest rulers are difficult to translate exactly into our calendar.) The transition from prehistory to the First Dynasty is known as the predynastic period. The Old Kingdom forms the first major division after that, ending about 2155 B.C. with the overthrow of the Sixth Dynasty. This method of counting historic time conveys at once the strong Egyptian sense of continuity and the overwhelming importance of the pharaoh (king), who was not only the supreme ruler but also a god. The pharaoh transcended all people, for his kingship was not a duty or privilege derived from a superhuman source, but was absolute, divine. This belief remained the key feature of Egyptian civilization and largely determined the character of Egyptian art. We do not know exactly the steps by which the early pharaohs established their claim to divinity, but we know their historic achievements: molding the Nile Valley from the first cataract at Assuan to the Delta into a single, effective state, and increasing its fertility by regulating the river waters through dams and canals.

**TOMBS AND RELIGION.** Of these vast public works nothing remains today, and very little has survived of ancient Egyptian palaces and cities. Our knowledge of Egyptian civilization rests almost entirely on the tombs and their contents. This is no accident, since these tombs were built to last forever, yet we must not make the mistake of concluding that the Egyptians viewed life on this earth mainly as a road to the grave. Their preoccupation with the cult of the dead is a link with the Neolithic past, but the meaning they gave it was quite new and different: the dark fear of the spirits of the dead which dominates primitive ancestor cults seems entirely absent. Instead, the Egyptian attitude was that each person must provide for his or her own happy afterlife. [See Primary Sources, no. 1, page 244.] The ancient Egyptians would equip their tombs as a kind of shadowy replica of their daily environment for their spirits (*ka*) to enjoy. They would make sure that the *ka* had a body to dwell in (their own mummified corpse or, if that should become destroyed, a statue of themselves).

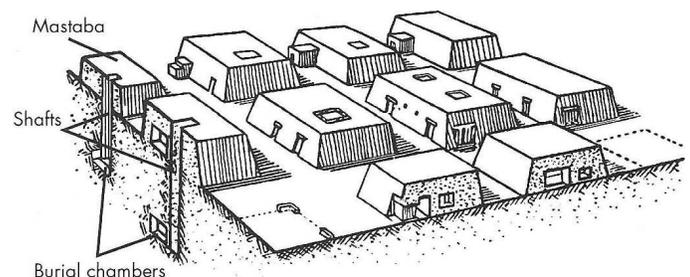
There is a curious blurring of the sharp line between life and death here, and perhaps that was the essential impulse behind these mock households. People who knew that after death their *kas* would enjoy the same pleasures they did, and who had provided these pleasures in advance by their own efforts, could look forward to active and happy lives without being haunted by fear of the great unknown. In a sense, then, the Egyptian tomb was a kind of life insurance, an investment in peace of mind. Such, at least, is the impression one gains of Old Kingdom tombs. Later on, the serenity of this concept of death was disturbed by a tendency to subdivide the spirit or soul into two or more separate identities and by the introduction of a sort of judgment, a weighing of souls. Only then do we also find expressions of the fear of death.

### Third Dynasty

The beauty of the style which we saw in the Narmer palette did not develop fully until about three centuries later, during the Third Dynasty, and especially under the reign of King Zoser, its greatest figure. From the Tomb of Hesy-ra, one of Zoser's high officials, comes the masterly wooden relief (fig. 55) showing the deceased with the emblems of his rank. These include writing materials, since the position of scribe was a highly honored one. The view of the figure corresponds exactly to that of Narmer on the palette, but the proportions are far more balanced and harmonious, and the carving of the physical details shows keen observation as well as great delicacy of touch.

**TOMBS.** When we speak of the Egyptians' attitude toward death and afterlife as expressed in their tombs, we must be careful to make it clear that we do not mean the attitude of the average Egyptian but only that of the small aristocratic caste clustered around the royal court. The tombs of the members of this class of high officials, who were often relatives of the royal family, are usually found in the immediate neighborhood of the pharaohs' tombs. Their shape and contents reflect, or are related to, the funerary monuments of the divine kings. We still have a great deal to learn about the origin and significance of Egyptian tombs, but there is reason to believe that the concept of afterlife we find in the so-called private tombs did not apply to ordinary mortals but only to the privileged few because of their association with the immortal pharaohs. [See Primary Sources, no. 2, page 244.]

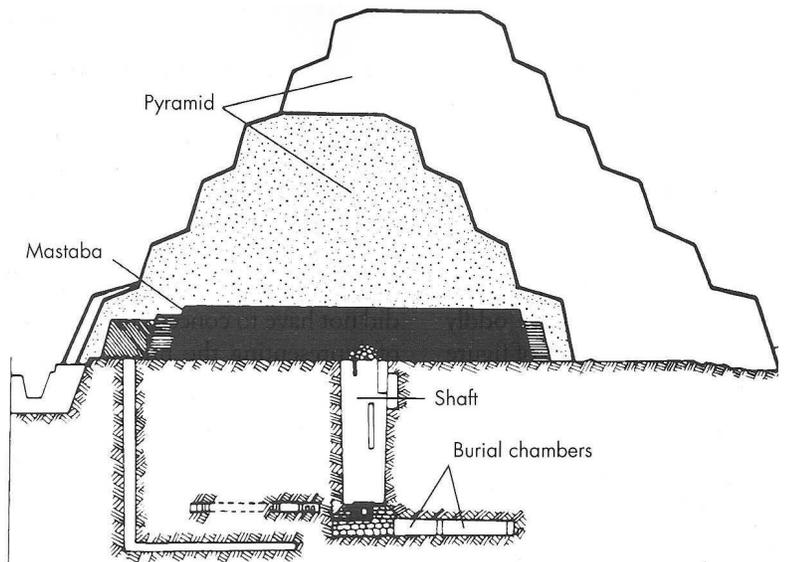
**MASTABAS.** The standard form of these tombs was the *mastaba*, a squarish mound faced with brick or stone, above the burial chamber, which was deep underground and linked to the mound by a shaft (figs. 56 and 57). Inside the *mastaba* is a chapel for offerings to the *ka* and a secret cubicle for the statue of the deceased. Royal *mastabas* grew to conspicuous size as early as the First Dynasty, and their exteriors could be elaborated to resemble a royal palace. During the Third Dynasty, they developed into step pyramids. The best known (and probably the first) is that of King Zoser (fig. 58), built over a traditional



56. Group of mastabas (after A. Badawy). 4th Dynasty

*mastaba* (see figs. 57 and 59). The pyramid itself, unlike later examples, is a completely solid structure whose only purpose seems to have been to serve as a great landmark.

**FUNERARY DISTRICTS.** The modern imagination, enamored of "the silence of the pyramids," is apt to create a false picture of these monuments. They were not erected as isolated structures in the middle of the desert, but were part of vast funerary districts, with temples and other buildings that were the scene of great religious celebrations during the pharaoh's lifetime as well as after. The most elaborate of these is the funerary district around the Step Pyramid of Zoser (fig. 59). Enough of its architecture has survived to make us understand why its creator, Imhotep, came to be deified in later Egyptian tradition. He is the first artist whose name has been recorded in history, and deservedly so, since his achievement is most impressive even today.



57. Transverse section of the Step Pyramid of King Zoser, Saqqara

## THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

After the collapse of centralized pharaonic power at the end of the Sixth Dynasty, Egypt entered a period of political disturbances and ill fortune that was to last almost 700 years. During most of this time, effective authority lay in the hands of local or regional overlords, who revived the old rivalry of North and South. Many dynasties followed one another in rapid succession, but only two, the Eleventh and Twelfth, are worthy of note. The latter constitute the Middle Kingdom (2134-1785 B.C.), when a series of able rulers managed to reassert themselves against the provincial nobility. However, the spell of divine kingship, having once been broken, never regained its old effectiveness, and the authority of the Middle Kingdom pharaohs tended to be personal rather than institutional. Soon after the close of the Twelfth Dynasty, the weakened country was invaded by the Hyksos, a western Asiatic people of somewhat mysterious origin, who seized the Delta area and ruled it for 150 years until their expulsion by the princes of Thebes about 1570 B.C.

## THE NEW KINGDOM

The 500 years following the expulsion of the Hyksos, and comprising the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth dynasties, represent the third and final flowering of Egypt. The country, once more united under strong and efficient kings, extended its frontiers far to the east, into Palestine and Syria; hence this period is also known as the Empire. During the climactic period of power and prosperity, between about 1500 B.C. and the end of the reign of Ramesses III in 1162 B.C., tremendous architectural projects were carried out, centering on the region of the new capital, Thebes, while the royal tombs reached unequaled material splendor.

The divine kingship of the pharaohs was now asserted in a new way: by association with the god Amun, whose identity had been fused with that of the sun-god Ra, and who became the supreme deity, ruling the lesser gods much as the pharaoh towered above the provincial nobility. This very development produced an unexpected threat to royal authority: the priests of Amun grew into a caste of such wealth and power that the pharaoh could maintain his position only with their consent. Amenhotep IV, the most remarkable figure of the Eighteenth Dynasty, tried to defeat them by proclaiming his faith in a single god, the sun disk Aten. He changed his name to Akhenaten, closed the Amun temples, and moved the capital to central Egypt, near the modern Tell el'Amarna. His attempt to place himself at the head of a new monotheistic faith, however, did not outlast his reign (1365-1347 B.C.), and under his successors orthodoxy was speedily restored. During the long decline that began about 1000 B.C., the country became increasingly priest-ridden, until, under Greek and Roman rule, Egyptian civilization came to an end in a welter of esoteric religious doctrines.