

Introduction

Concerning Egypt there is no other country that possesses so many wonders.

HERODOTUS

For many people today any mention of Egypt brings to mind images of pyramids and mummies, the products of an ancient and mysterious civilization so old as to defy imagination. The modern fascination with ancient Egypt and its monuments is seemingly without end and never seems to be satisfied. The land of Egypt and its culture provide the material for countless films, special presentations on television, and sensational news articles about recent excavations. Every new archaeological discovery is hailed as “the greatest find since King Tut.” So many misconceptions and misunderstandings abound concerning the history and archaeology of Egypt that it is often difficult to separate simple fact from romantic fiction. However, it is still possible even after so many centuries to know a great deal about how the Egyptians really lived, how they conducted their affairs, and the kinds of objects and materials they used.

The allure of the great monuments and the secrets of mummification cannot take away from the obvious fact that these ancient peoples were human beings. They lived their lives in a culture that seems foreign in many ways to us today, but they had many of the same basic needs that we do. Certainly there are differences in the ways many things were done, but this is more a matter of the long progress of developing technology rather than differences in culture. It is always amazing to see how many of the ordinary aspects of life have not changed from the way that the Egyptians carried them out thousands of years ago. We have excellent evidence of many aspects of their life to prove this, from the dwellings they lived in and the clothes they wore to the food they ate and even the games they played.

There have been many books written about the “daily life” of the ancient Egyptians in efforts to explain the various aspects of their culture. These works usually go far beyond examining how people



FIGURE 1 Fishing and fowling. Dynasty Eighteen
 Facsimile of a painting from Theban Tomb 52, tomb of Nakht
 This famous tomb painting is best known for the scene of hunting and fishing shown in the upper section. However, the lower register contains depictions of great interest as well. These include the harvesting of grapes, processing of wine, trapping of ducks and geese, preparation of the fowl, and the presentation of fish, fowl, and fruit to add to the piles of produce before the deceased and his wife.
 Norman de Garis Davies (1865–1941), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1915 (15.5.19e). Reproduction of any kind is prohibited without express written permission in advance from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

lived and the materials they used and include attempts to explain in detail the lengthy history, complex religion, and strangely different artistic styles. So much is known about this ancient civilization from the work of modern scholars that it is hardly needed to repeat the same kinds of information found in the popular books available on topics such as the technical aspects of mummification or the construction methods used to create the justly famous architecture. What might be more useful to the general reader or the student is the discussion here of the culture of the ancient Egyptians from the standpoint of the basic materials that were employed to make life possible and perhaps even enjoyable.

One of the misconceptions about ancient Egypt that should be addressed from the beginning is the mistaken idea that customs and

processes never changed. The simple fact is that over the three thousand years of history of the ancient culture many things changed, and the differences can be identified and documented. We are able to see that the Egyptians were conscious of ideas of style and adaptable to new technologies, and we can produce abundant evidence to prove this. When a question is raised about any aspect of the culture, the answer must be qualified within a time frame. The life and technologies of 2500 BCE were not the same as those in 1230 BCE. As it was in almost every culture aspects of Egyptian life evolved so that a description of clothing or pottery or furniture at any one time would not necessarily apply to the same materials in another period. The Egypt of Cleopatra was distant from the time of the Pyramids by twenty-five hundred years, and the cultural and material changes in that time reflected the distance.

Over its long history Egyptian civilization became highly developed in many areas of the arts and crafts. The questions that are usually asked in the investigation of the material aspects of any culture and people, past or present, have to do with their dwellings, costume, objects of daily use, food and drink, tools for various occupations, methods of transport, and methods of production. How all of these originated and developed can be traced with the many clues that are available to us. It is possible to reconstruct the picture of these aspects of the life of the ancient Egyptians from the wealth of archaeological artifacts that have been preserved. The great number of objects that have come down to us provide many concrete examples of the kinds of things made, used, and sometimes treasured.

Basically there are three categories of information that contribute to our knowledge. They include the actual preserved objects, which are certainly the most direct evidence; the artistic representations in temples and tombs, which add a great deal; and the written descriptions in texts, which add still more information. All of these together inform us about the details of the material culture. However, caution has to be applied to all of this evidence. The life illustrated in the tombs and many of the objects preserved in them is that of the noble, elite, or privileged classes in ancient Egypt. To use these as a standard of how everyone lived probably gives a seriously distorted view. We have far less evidence concerning the common people and how they managed their lives and occupations, and it would obviously be incorrect to assume that their life was completely similar to the life of the nobility.

A remarkable asset for the study of the life of the ancient Egyptians is the abundant amount of information available in the

form of preserved objects. No other ancient civilization has provided us with the extensive opportunity to experience so much of the material culture of antiquity as has ancient Egypt. The dry climate contributed to the natural preservation of many types of perishable objects, including papyrus documents, wooden furniture, clothing and other articles of textile, sandals of leather, and even fans made of feathers. The traditional religious belief of providing material goods in the tomb for the life of the spirit after death caused the Egyptians to leave behind a wide range of possessions that were needed, used, and even treasured. As a result we are able to see firsthand what was used, imagine how it was employed, and investigate the details of how it was made. A catalog of such objects includes a range of items from clothing and personal ornament, such as jewelry, to tools, weapons, and playthings, creating a virtual encyclopedia of ancient life as it was lived on the banks of the Nile.

In addition to the actual objects, the religious custom of depicting detailed views of activities on the walls of tombs makes it possible to supplement the objects with illustrations of many of the trades and crafts. It is often possible to examine all of the important steps in a process of manufacture. There are many instances of this, but a typical example will illustrate how complete the documentation can be. The production of bread begins with the growing of cereal crops and ends with the finished staple food. Paintings or relief carvings on tomb walls depict the process of plowing and sowing seed, the types of animals used to pull the plow, and the construction of the tools employed. Actual examples of plows have also been found. The sowing of the grain is presented, and the types of bags for transporting and storing the seed are preserved. The harvesting or cutting of the grain is illustrated, and examples of the wooden sickles with cutting edges made from flint blades have been found. The actions of threshing to separate the grain from the straw and the winnowing to remove the chaff are carved and painted in detail on tomb walls. Wooden paddles or scoops used to throw the grain into the air in the winnowing process have also been discovered. Even more evidence is provided by small models made to be put into the tomb for the benefit of the spirit, where the grinding of the grain to make flour is depicted and the bakery organization of both bread production and the brewing of beer are detailed in three dimensions. These activities will be discussed at greater length in the chapter on food and drink.

A third class of information is preserved in the form of documentary evidence with the actual objects and the artistic representations

of how they were used. These “documents” can be as simple as a short notation on a broken piece of pottery or as complex as a lengthy list detailing the contents of a temple storeroom or the food rations for a workforce. This kind of evidence includes a wide range of examples extending from temple inventories to personal laundry lists. Contracts with tradesmen for the making of furniture and other household objects or the lists of the provisions allotted to crews of workmen all add to our knowledge of what was used and valued, how it was traded, or how it was obtained.

There are many things about the material world of ancient Egypt that will never be known, but the amount of information we have on some aspects of life among the Egyptians is so vast that we have the unusual chance to investigate and understand it as nowhere else among ancient cultures. The Egyptians seemed to be very literal-minded in one respect: the belief in an afterlife was such that you could “take it with you” – if you could afford it. The affluent could furnish their tombs with their possessions and paraphernalia of this life to be used in the next world. This custom does result in another very important misconception that is often held about ancient Egypt. A general misunderstanding about the Egyptians is that they were obsessed with ideas of death; one has only to study the complex process of mummification as it developed over the centuries to make this assumption. In fact, the Egyptians seemed to be in love with life and wanted more than anything else to prepare for a “goodly burial” that would insure a continuation of life in the next world. This elaborate preparation with the provision of material goods almost guaranteed that archaeologists and historians would be able to study the various aspects of crafts and technologies in great detail from preserved objects.

As artifacts have been discovered and studied from the successive dynasties in the long history of Egypt it seems possible to infer information about developing technologies from the advanced quality and expanding quantity of the material preserved. A typical example to support this assumption is illustrated by the kinds of objects that have been found that originated in the time before the beginning of writing and before Egypt was unified under one rule. Called the Predynastic Period, this was an era when settlements along the banks of the Nile had first begun to become more complex and better organized, a period considered to be the beginnings of urbanization, the move to living in villages and towns. The evolution of types of pottery, stone vessels, cosmetics palettes, tools, and weapons during the Predynastic Period tends to support ideas of a progressing

civilization where the crafts and trades were becoming the occupations of highly specialized workmen.

What does this specialization mean for the craftsmen and their families? In a culture with developed craft production it is almost certain that the craftsmen no longer had to provide directly for their own food and other daily needs. They are no longer the hunters or the farmers, but they exchange their time, skills, and experience with those who are. The skillfully made pottery of the Predynastic Period clearly shows a high level of tradition, experience, and craftsmanship. The vessels made from hard stone of varied colors also suggest a degree of technical skill and artistic sensitivity that is almost hard to imagine in a culture where the formulation of a written language is only just beginning to develop. It seems logical to deduce that specialization of labor, where skills are learned and practiced in agreement with others who learn and practice other trades, was one of the steps on the way to a more complex society. Thus, the material finds shed light on human activity, even in a period when there are no written records to turn to.

It is also easy to move to conclusions that are not completely supported by the information available. Perhaps one could propose that some of the emerging ideas about crafts or technology may have been brought from some outside source because they seem to appear suddenly in a culture. This may or may not be the case, and this is an example where care must be taken in making assumptions, particularly about the formative period before the appearance of written evidence. It is always important when studying ancient Egypt, or any other ancient culture, to remember that the evidence may not be complete and interpretations may be subject to change in the light of new discoveries. There are a number of factors that cause this. Material from the south in Egypt and from dry tombs vastly outweighs the finds from the north, where fragile objects were not as often preserved in the wet conditions of the Nile delta. Objects that might have otherwise provided valuable information may have simply disappeared due to decay or vandalism.

There are also clear gaps in the different kinds of records that have come down to us. The regular annual flooding of the Nile, so vital to the development of agriculture, washed away or buried evidence that would have been useful to complete the archaeological picture. Our imaginary picture of ancient Egyptian life is also slanted because of a preferred use of some materials. Temples and tombs were the structures considered most important for religious reasons and were built of seemingly durable stone; they were intended to last

for eternity. The dwellings for the living, rich and poor, royal and common, were made of perishable unbaked mud brick that often did not survive as well. In short, all evidence of the material world of the ancient Egyptians must be studied with care and with due regard for the geography, physical conditions, context where it was found, and even techniques used by the archaeologists who found it.

The amazing range of preserved artifacts has been a fascinating study from the beginnings of modern interest in ancient Egypt. As the country became more receptive to foreign visitors and scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, objects and artifacts were collected for their value not only as curiosities but also for what they could reveal about the ancient civilization. Clothing, furniture, tools, weapons, cosmetic articles, and other useful objects have provided the details of history that would otherwise have been unknown. It may seem obvious but, with few exceptions, the texts of ancient historians give us more information about statecraft and warfare than they do about the ordinary activities of life.

Additional caution is required in the interpretation of the preserved artifacts and the supplementary information of the graphic illustrations in the tombs. It would be simple to make the assumption that, because some chairs and beds have been preserved, everyone in Egyptian society had the luxury of wooden furniture, something we might take for granted today. This is not necessarily true and will be a subject for examination later. There is also an inclination to simplify the discussion or description of types of artifacts, assuming that they were typical or standard. In actuality, styles and uses changed over the long history of Egypt. From the information we have, the clothing styles and design of the Old Kingdom seem remarkably different from that of the New Kingdom, roughly a millennium later. Egypt was certainly not an unchanging society, and this has to be taken into account in any discussion of the life of the people and the materials they used.

In the modern mind there is a strong tendency to make the general assumption that there was little change in the ancient world – that the lives of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, or Romans were pretty much the same throughout their respective histories. As it is usually described in history texts, the period termed Pharaonic Egypt – the time of the Pharaohs – lasted more than three thousand years. Although the history of the Greek and Roman world did not last as long in comparison to Egypt, there was development and change in those cultures in almost every aspect of life. It would be hard to imagine that there was little or no change in ancient

Egypt if one only considers how quickly styles are replaced and fads come and go today. The ancient peoples were no less inventive and interested in new ideas. The alterations and adjustments may not have been so radical or obvious to us, but any study of art and customs will make it clear that there were remarkable advances in many aspects of how life was lived, even in a society as rigidly structured as Egypt. In Egypt innovation and change were certainly constrained by attention to honored tradition and customary usage, but nevertheless change, however gradual, still occurred. It is those changes that make a study of the material world of ancient Egypt more complex, more multifaceted, and in many ways more interesting.

Geography and Geology: The Land

1

Generally speaking, we may say that the Nile surpasses all the rivers of the inhabited world in its benefactions to mankind.

DIODORUS SICULUS

“The land of Egypt is the gift of the river,” one of the most often quoted observations about ancient Egypt, was made by Herodotus, the fifth-century BCE Greek historian. It was not an original idea of his, and he may have even borrowed it from another ancient author, but it was a common way in his time to describe the dependence that the country had on the life-giving renewal brought by the annual inundation, or flooding, of the river Nile. His statement also emphasized the fact that the fertile Nile delta had been built up over centuries by the silt carried downstream each year by that flood, and it was fundamentally the delta that the world of the Greeks and Romans knew best.

The landscape of Egypt as seen from space has been compared to a lotus flower on a long stalk, with only one large leaf on one side. In a satellite image the long ribbon of the Nile and the narrow cultivated area along its banks terminates in the fan-shaped delta, the “flower.” The “leaf” is the Fayum depression on the west, with its large lake. Although it is obviously a coincidence, the visual comparison of Egypt to the lotus is an apt one because the ancient Egyptians had a strong belief in the symbolism of the flower as an image of rebirth or resurrection.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Egyptian landscape is the sharp division that can be seen between the sand of the desert and the rich black land of the cultivated areas (Fig. 2). The two are in such sharp contrast that it is possible to stand with one foot in the desert and the other on soil where crops are growing. In antiquity the Egyptians called the cultivated land, the black earth, *kemit* and the desert, with its red sand, *deshret*. They termed themselves “the people of the black land.”

On maps with the usual modern orientation, with north at the top, the area traditionally termed Lower Egypt is the land from the



FIGURE 2 The Nile valley at Saqqara

The clear demarcation between the desert and the cultivation can be seen in the lower part of the image. The mountain range in the east of the valley is in the far distance. In the region of Memphis the Nile valley begins to widen into the fan-shaped delta.

Author's photograph

area of modern Cairo north to the Mediterranean Sea. Upper Egypt is at the bottom of the modern map. “Upper Egypt” is upriver; “Lower Egypt” is downriver (Fig. 3). This is usually confusing to people with a preconceived “north is upper because it is at the top” orientation, but it made perfect sense to the Egyptians. Throughout Egyptian history the unity of the country was expressed in the phrase “the two lands,” acknowledging the contrast between the lush lands of the delta and the arid desert-mountain landscape of the country farther south. In the past it was assumed that the reverent use of the term “the two lands” was a memory of the time before the country was unified, but now it is assumed to refer to the eternal unity of the two distinct parts of the country, Upper and Lower Egypt, as one entity, and it emphasizes their character as particular parts of the whole.

Throughout its history ancient Egypt was basically an agricultural country with a rural, farming-based economy (Fig. 4). This is well demonstrated by both the archaeological remains and the many preserved painted and carved representations of the work in the fields and on the estates. A traveler in Egypt today might be impressed by the rice fields in the Nile delta and the sugarcane fields