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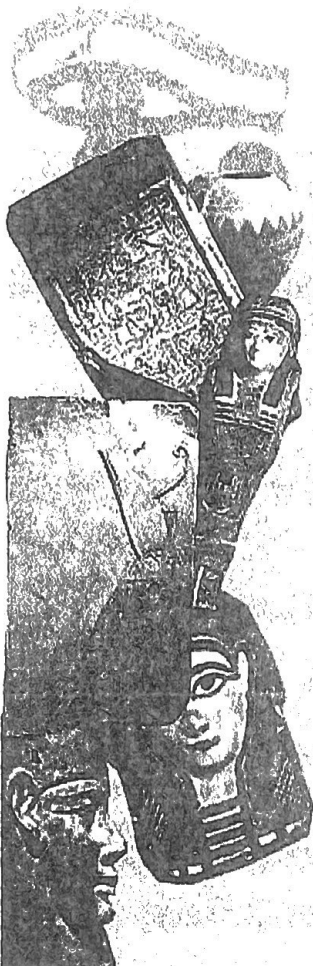
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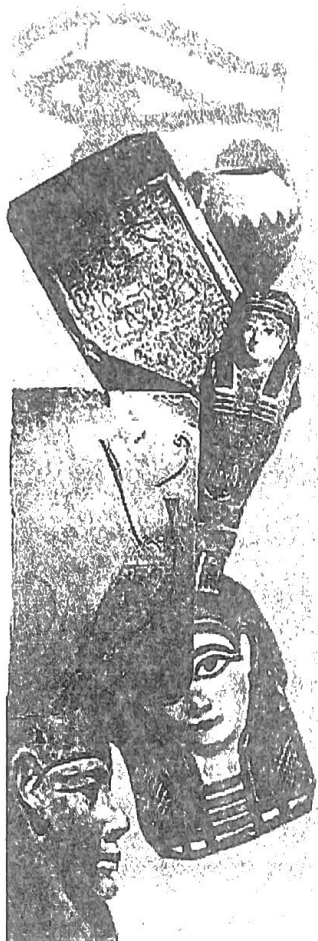
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Orientation |

Because of its location at the crossroads of the African and Asian continents, Egypt has been an important geographical and political power since the earliest times. In ancient times, the boundaries of Egypt were the Mediterranean Sea to the north and Elephantine (modern Aswan) to the south. Its eastern and western boundaries were in the high desert on either side of the narrow strip of Nile valley and low desert. The Nile River, the most important geographic feature in the area, runs the length of the country, flowing from south to north.

Ancient Egypt was divided into two regions: Upper and Lower Egypt. Lower (northern) Egypt consisted of the Nile River's delta made by the river as it empties into the Mediterranean. Today the Delta is fifteen thousand square miles of alluvium (silt), which has been deposited over the centuries by the annual flooding of the Nile. For much of Egypt's history, this area was only thinly settled, although it was used as a grazing area for cattle.

Upper Egypt was the long, narrow strip of ancient Egypt located south of the Delta. This area is composed of four topographic zones: the Nile River, the floodplain, the low desert, and the high desert. Each of these zones was exploited differently by the ancient Egyptians.

Throughout their history, Egyptians shared a common language, world view, and institutional structure, as well as a common territory. Ancient Egyptians had a keen sense of the distinctiveness and superiority of their culture, and they struggled to maintain it. Many of the rituals they performed encouraged continuity with earlier periods of their history that they visualized as ideal.



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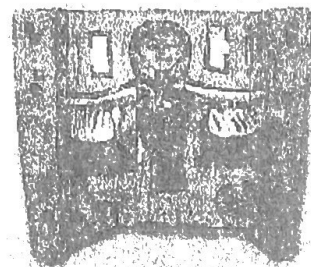
Much of our knowledge about ancient Egyptian culture comes from archaeological evidence uncovered in tombs. Objects, inscriptions, and paintings from tombs have led Egyptologists to conclude that what appeared to be a preoccupation with death was in actuality an overwhelming desire to secure and perpetuate in the afterlife the "good life" enjoyed on earth.

Over the more than three thousand years of ancient Egypt's history, traditional beliefs about the transition to eternal life persisted, with new ideas being incorporated from time to time. Most important for full participation in the afterlife was the need for an individual's identity to be preserved. Consequently, the body had to remain intact and receive regular offerings of food and drink.

The afterlife was assured by:

1. Preserving the body through mummification.
2. Protecting the body in a tomb in which the name of the deceased was inscribed.
3. Providing the deceased with food and drink or illustrations of it in case no one was available to make the offerings.

To protect the spirit of the deceased, scenes and inscriptions were written on coffins and the walls of tombs. These texts included such writings as adaptations of the myth about the death of Osiris and spells to protect the deceased on his or her dangerous journey to the underworld. Figures known as shabtis functioned as servants for the deceased.



The *ba* depicted as a human-headed bird on a coffin fragment

The final step in the transition to the afterlife was the judgment by Osiris, god of the underworld, in a ritual known as the Weighing of the Heart. If a person had led a decent life, he or she would be judged worthy of eternal life. Many spells and rituals were designed to ensure a favorable judgment and were written in the papyrus or linen "Book of the Dead."

All ancient Egyptians believed in the afterlife and spent their lives preparing for it. Pharaohs built the finest tombs, collected the most elaborate funerary equipment, and were mummified in the most expensive way. Others were able to provide for their afterlives according to their earthly means. Regardless of their wealth, however, they all expected the afterlife to be an idealized version of their earthly existence.



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Mummification 3

The process of mummification, the form of embalming practiced by the ancient Egyptians, changed over time from the Old Kingdom (ca. 2750-2250 B.C.), when it was available only to kings, to the New Kingdom (ca. 1539-1070 B.C.), when it was available to everyone. The level of mummification depended on what one could afford. The most fully developed form involved four basic steps:

1. All of the internal organs, except the heart, were removed. Since the organs were the first parts of the body to decompose but were necessary in the afterlife, they were mummified and put in canopic jars that were placed in the tomb at the time of burial. The heart was believed to be the seat of intelligence and emotion and was, therefore, left in the body. The brain, on the other hand, was regarded as having no significant value and, beginning in the New Kingdom, was removed through the nose and discarded.

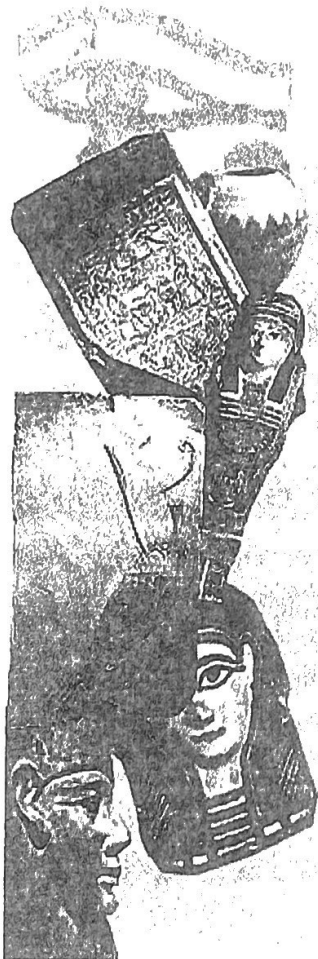
2. The body was packed and covered with natron, a salty drying agent, and left to dry out for forty to fifty days. By this time all the body's liquid had been absorbed and only the hair, skin, and bones were left.

3. The body cavity was stuffed with resin, sawdust, or linen and shaped to restore the deceased's form and features.

4. The body was then tightly wrapped in many layers of linen with numerous good luck charms, or amulets, wrapped between the layers. The most important amulet was the scarab beetle, which was placed over the heart. Jewelry was also placed among the bandages. At each stage of wrapping, a priest recited spells and prayers. This whole procedure could take as long as fifteen days. After the wrapping was complete, the body was put into a shroud. The entire mummification process took about seventy days.

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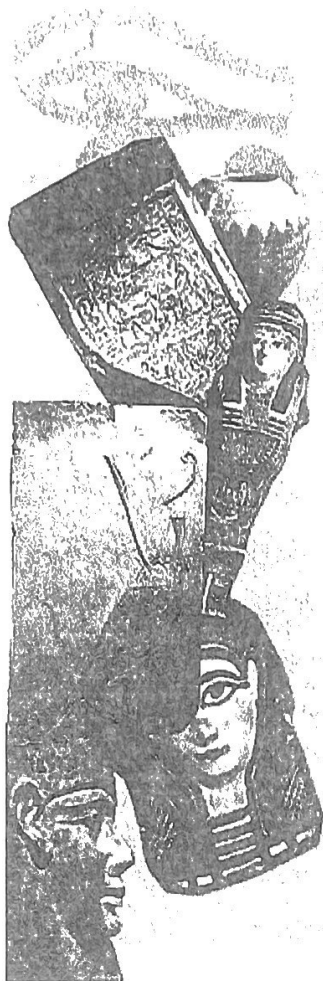
The ancient Egyptians interpreted every occurrence in terms of the relationship between natural and supernatural forces. Those phenomena that figured prominently in their lives included the annual cycle of the Nile River's flood, the enormous size and unchanging harshness of the surrounding desert, and the daily cycle of the sun's appearance in the east, gradual movement across the sky, and eventual disappearance in the west. The ancient Egyptians developed a world view in which these and other events and conditions were attributed to the actions of multiple, related gods and goddesses.

The ancient Egyptians imagined the world to be a far different place from what we now know it to be. They believed the earth was a flat platter of clay afloat on a vast sea of water from which the Nile River sprung. In this fundamental description of the world, the forces of nature were identified as divine descendants of the creator god.

When we try to make some sense out of the many Egyptian gods and goddesses, we must keep two important facts in mind. First, early in Egyptian history Lower (north) and Upper (south) Egypt were unified under one ruler. This union resulted in the merging of several cultural traditions. Second, because ancient Egyptian civilization existed for more than three thousand years, the deities and myths gradually changed over time as a result of new ideas, contact with other peoples, and changing cultural values.

One of the best-known legends in Egyptian mythology, for example, revolves around a deity who at one time may have been a local ruler in the Nile River's delta. Originally Osiris was a god associated with the city of Busiris in the Delta; over time this regional god gained countrywide acceptance.

As the religion of Egypt evolved, various gods gained importance. The falcon-headed god depicted on this coffin fragment is identified as Re-Horakhty-Atum, the god central in creation myths. Re, the sun god, had several aspects: Khepri, the morning; Horakhty, the midday; and Atum, the afternoon. During Dynasty XXI (ca. 1070-945 B.C.) with increasing frequency he replaced Osiris in the traditional offering formula.



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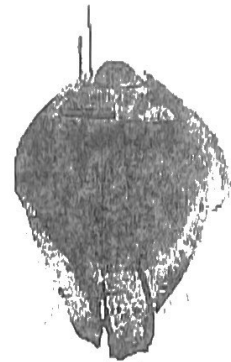
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The most important geographic feature in Egypt is the Nile River itself. It was the lifeblood of ancient Egypt, and still makes life possible in the otherwise barren desert. The longest river in the world (over 4,000 miles), the Nile is formed by the union in Khartoum, Sudan, of the White Nile from Lake Victoria in Uganda and the Blue Nile from the mountains of Ethiopia.

The Nile was the principal means of travel for the people of ancient Egypt. They developed various types of boats, including cargo, passenger, funerary, and naval vessels, to journey on the river.

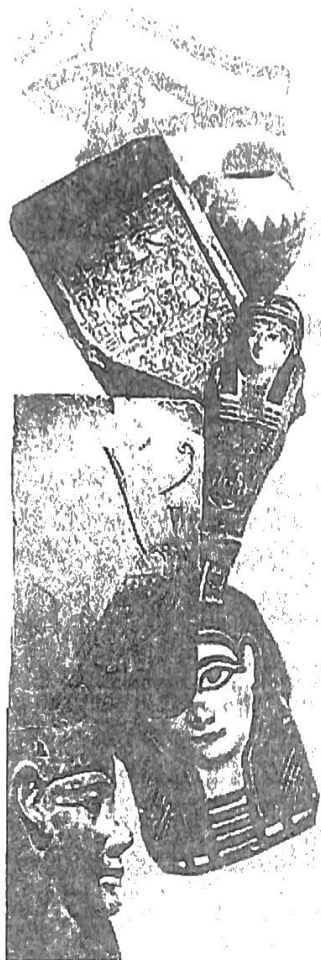
This ancient boat, displayed in The Walton Hall of Ancient Egypt, dates to about 1859 B.C. It may have been used in the funeral rituals of Senwosret III, a powerful Dynasty XII Pharaoh. Study of the boat has yielded important information about boat building in ancient Egypt.



The Nile also served as a source of food for the people of ancient Egypt and was crucial to agriculture in the region. The river teemed with fish, and the ancient Egyptians consumed many different kinds, including catfish, mullet, boliti, and perch. Because it left a layer of nutrient-bearing silt when the waters of the annual inundation receded and provided water for irrigation, the Nile made agriculture and, therefore, life in ancient Egypt possible. The river was a regular and predictable source of water in a desert environment. Because the annual flood of the Nile revitalized the floodplain with water and new soil, it symbolized rebirth for the ancient Egyptians.

The low strip of fertile land located on either side of the Nile River is known as the floodplain. Most ancient settlements were located on the highest ground of this zone, and most of the farming occurred here. A strip of higher land on either side of the floodplain, known as the low desert, was not watered by the Nile. It was a zone of little vegetation where men hunted and where the Egyptians located their cemeteries.

The high desert was a barren area that was crossed only by trade caravans or organized groups searching for stone and mineral resources. Several oases located in the high desert were cultivated to grow valuable crops like grapes and dates. These areas were important links in trade with more remote areas.



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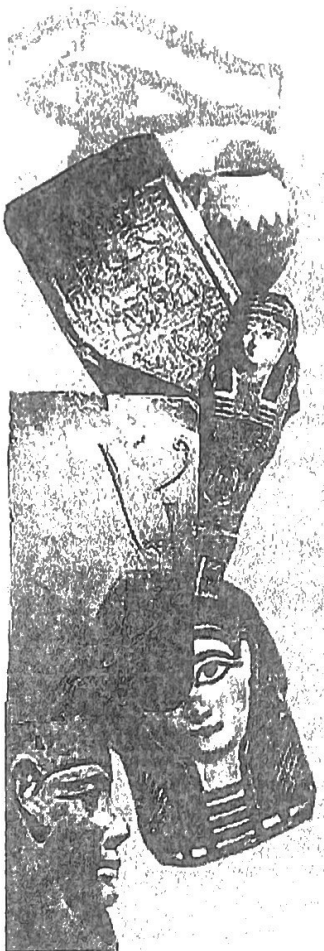
To understand the everyday life of ancient Egyptians, archaeologists draw on many sources. The most valuable sources include tomb paintings, reliefs, and the objects included in tombs that the Egyptians used in their daily life. Artifacts from the few towns that have been excavated and hundreds of documents written by the ancient Egyptians shed additional light on their life. Much of the day-to-day running of their households, however, remains obscure.

The nuclear family was the fundamental social unit of ancient Egypt. The father was responsible for the economic well-being of the family, and the mother supervised the household and cared for the upbringing of the children. Although Egyptian children had toys and are occasionally depicted at play, much of their time was spent preparing for adulthood. For example, peasant children accompanied their parents into the fields; the male offspring of craftsmen often served as apprentices to their fathers. Privileged children sometimes received formal education to become scribes or army officers.

The few furnishings in the ancient Egyptian home were simple in design. The most common piece of furniture was a low stool, used by all Egyptians including the pharaoh. These stools were made from wood, had leather or woven rush seats, and had three or four legs. Most kitchens were equipped with a cylindrical, baked clay stove for cooking. Food was stored in wheel-made pottery. The basic cooking equipment was a two-handed pottery saucepan.

The ancient Egyptians embellished their usually plain clothing with elaborate costume jewelry. Both men and women wore jewelry such as earrings, bracelets, anklets, rings, and beaded necklaces. They incorporated into their jewelry many minerals including amethyst, garnet, jasper, onyx, turquoise, and lapis lazuli, as well as copper, gold, and shells. Because the Egyptians were very superstitious, frequently their jewelry contained good luck charms called amulets.

Cosmetics were not only an important part of Egyptian dress but also a matter of personal hygiene and health. Many items related to cosmetics have been found in tombs and are illustrated in tomb paintings. Oils and creams were of vital importance against the hot Egyptian sun and dry winds. Eye paint, both green and black, is probably the most characteristic of the Egyptian cosmetics. The green pigment, malachite, was made from copper. The black paint, called kohl, was made from lead or soot. Kohl was usually kept in a small pot that had a flat bottom, wide rim, tiny mouth, and a flat, disk-shaped lid.



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