

SUMMARY CHRONOLOGY

Predynastic Period
5500 BC - 3100

Early Dynastic Period
3100 - 2686
Dynasties 1-2

Old Kingdom
2686 - 2181
Dynasties 3-6

First Intermediate Period
2181 - 2040
Dynasties 7-10

Middle Kingdom
2133 - 1750
Dynasties 11-13

Second Intermediate Period
1750 - 1550
Dynasties 13-17

New Kingdom
1550 - 1070
Dynasties 18-20

Third Intermediate Period
1069 - 664
Dynasties 21-25

Late Dynastic Period
664 - 343
Dynasties 26-30

Persian Kings
343 - 332

Macedonian Kings
332 - 305

Ptolemaic Period
305 - 30

Roman Period
30 BC - 395 AD

Christian Period
395 - 640

Arab Conquest
640



(cover)

Mummy of the lady Tentdinebu in wooden coffin and cartonnage case

Probably from Thebes
22nd Dynasty, c.945-716 BC

Text: Dr Stephen Quirke, Dr John Taylor, British Museum
Photography: Valerie Dowling © National Museum of Ireland

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Archaeology

National Museum of Ireland
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann

FREE ADMISSION

ANCIENT EGYPT

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FREE ADMISSION

The National Museum's Egyptian collection comprises about three thousand objects, the majority acquired from excavations carried out in Egypt between the 1890s and the 1920s and ranging in date from the Stone Age to the Middle Ages. The finest and most important of them are exhibited to provide a window on ancient Egypt within Ireland.



Pl 1

THE NILE VALLEY

The river Nile is the life of Egypt providing fresh water for a rainless land. Until this century it followed an annual cycle of three seasons:- the August to November flood which left a coating of fresh mud over the fields; the December to March sowing season for the staple crops of barley, emmer wheat and flax for linen and the dry harvest season from April to July. The river also acted as an uninterrupted routeway between the granite rocks at Aswan and the Mediterranean Sea 700 miles to the north. Cart and wheel were not useful within the narrow confines of the Nile Valley. Boats provided the easiest means of transport (Pl 1). A round trip from the north to the south of the country took two to three weeks. Horses were introduced from Asia during the New Kingdom period, c.1550 BC, as luxury animals to draw the chariots of the kings and nobles but they never replaced cattle and donkeys as beasts of burden.

The Sahara set the limits of settled life in Egypt. With few large oases, the desert supported life only on a small scale. In Upper Egypt, many cemeteries and a few town sites lie on desert ground beside the fields of the Valley. The dry conditions have preserved the burials goods and the discarded possessions of everyday life which would have perished in damper soil (Pl 2).

Painted wooden model of a Nile boat with rowers and armed guard

(Pl 1)

From Beni Hasan, tomb 585

Early Twelfth Dynasty, c.1900 BC

Along the Nile, until modern times, boats offered the swiftest and most reliable transport and communication. Models of the different types were included in Middle Kingdom tomb equipment.



Pl 2

Sandals made of the papyrus reed

(Pl 2)

From Oxyrhynchus

Roman Period, first to fourth centuries AD

THE FIRST NATION-STATE

By 5000 BC farming was established in the different regions of Egypt. The gradual spread of the Badarian culture of Middle Egypt throughout the Valley which, eventually, subsumed the Delta area of Lower Egypt, resulted in the unification of the country by 3100 BC. Formal art and hieroglyphic writing were developed before 3200 BC, shortly after the invention of cuneiform script in Mesopotamia. The earliest texts already indicate that a single king controlled the unified 'Two Lands' of the Valley and the Delta.

Pl 3



Diorite vessel with handles for suspension

(Pl 3)

From Elephantine Island

Early Dynastic Period, c.3100-2613 BC

Three Gold finger rings

(Pl 4)

Provenance unknown

Eighteenth Dynasty, c.1550-1295 BC

Pl 4



After unification the fine pottery of the Badarian period was replaced by coarser wares while craftsmen quickly achieved mastery in stone and metal working. The Egyptians benefited from an abundance of natural resources such as hard and soft stones and a variety of minerals (Pl 3). Copper was the most commonly used metal until the New Kingdom, c.1550 BC, when tin bronze became more available.

The eastern deserts supplied gold and a colourful range of semi-precious stones. Silver, imported from the area of modern Greece and Turkey and lapis lazuli from central Asia, were used to produce jewellery which was worn by both men and women (Pl 4). The materials used and the styles changed over time with major innovations occurring in the New Kingdom, c.1550-1069 BC. Semi-precious stones were imitated in coloured faience and glass paste. Egyptian faience is an artificial composition of quartz sand, copper or bronze filings and an alkali.

Natural materials were also used to adorn the body in the form of cosmetics and oils. The principal cosmetics, used by both sexes, were eyeliner and scented oils. Green copper ores were originally favoured for eye paint but during the Old Kingdom, c.2686-2125 BC, they were generally replaced by the black lead ore, galena. Oils were obtained from local trees such as the moringa, while sweet-smelling resins were imported from Asia. Cosmetic containers are frequently found in burials marking their importance in this life and the next.



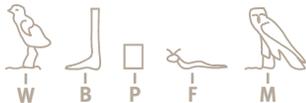
Pl 5

Stela of the local official Hetepneb

(Pl 5)

From Dra Abu el-Nega,
on the West Bank at Thebes
First Intermediate Period, c.2100 BC

Brick tomb chapels contained stone elements inscribed in hieroglyphics with texts to ensure an eternal supply of offerings for the deceased. Here the figures of Hetepneb, and his wife, and the cutting of the hieroglyphs are in the provincial style typical of the area north of Thebes at this time.



WRITING AND ART

The Egyptian hieroglyphic script (Pl 5) was developed during the final stages of the unification of the country between 3300 and 3000 BC. It was used for inscriptions and sacred manuscripts until the conversion of Egypt to Christianity in the fourth century AD. Although awkward for writing other languages, it is an extremely efficient vehicle for Egyptian, a dead language containing many groups of similar sounding words. It operates on the principle that signs represent either objects, ideas or sounds. Signs can represent one, two or three consonants or depict an object directly. Many words end with one of about fifty common and easily recognisable signs for categories of words e.g., a pair of legs is used to end verbs of motion such as 'to go'. As there was no need for vowels in this script it is difficult now to reconstruct the exact sound of Egyptian from the skeleton of consonants given by the script (Pl 6).

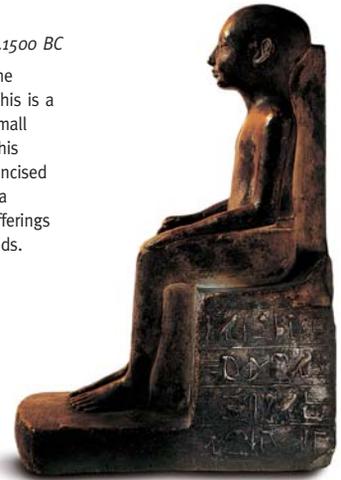
Hieroglyphic forms follow the same rules as formal art. Subjects are shown from their most characteristic angle in order to capture their essence. In complex subjects such as the human body each segment was depicted from its most attractive side - shoulders and eyes from the front, face and lower body in profile- and then the whole assembled as a still recognisable figure. Special training was necessary to achieve the correct proportions and most fine works of art were created at periods when royal or temple workshops flourished.

Limestone statue of Senemiah

(Pl 6)

Probably from Thebes
Early Eighteenth Dynasty, c.1500 BC

Senemiah was a priest of the Theban moon-god Khons. This is a fine example of a type of small statue placed in tombs at this period, inscribed in clearly incised hieroglyphs with the formula requesting a share in the offerings made by the king to the gods.

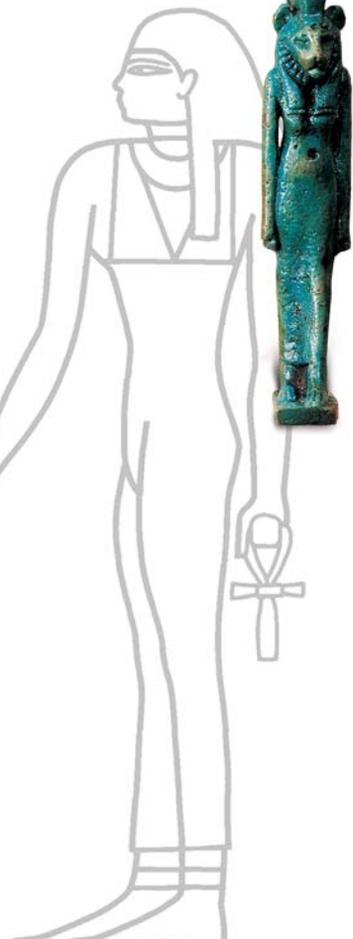


Pl 6

GODS AND TEMPLES

Egyptian religion revolved around the sun-god Ra, the source of life. At creation his original form, Atum - 'all matter', divided into different sections of the universe. Gods and goddesses embody either broad elements of this world, for example, Nut, the sky goddess, or relations within it such as the goddesses Isis the healer, Sekhmet for fury, Hathor for love (Pl 7).

Each temple housed an image - an earthly body for the spirit of the deity. Only the king and high priest could enter the sanctuary. Most Egyptians encountered the cult image only at festivals when it was borne outside the temple in a model barge. Prayers in words and as votive offerings were made at temple margins. These were often crudely fashioned, contrasting with the formal art of the temple walls and sculpture (Pl 8).



Pl 7

Figurine of a goddess with lioness head and solar disc

(Pl 7)

Provenance unknown
Late Period, after 700 BC

The form of woman with lioness head is used to depict several goddesses in Egyptian art, in their role as defenders of the sun-god and creation against his enemies.

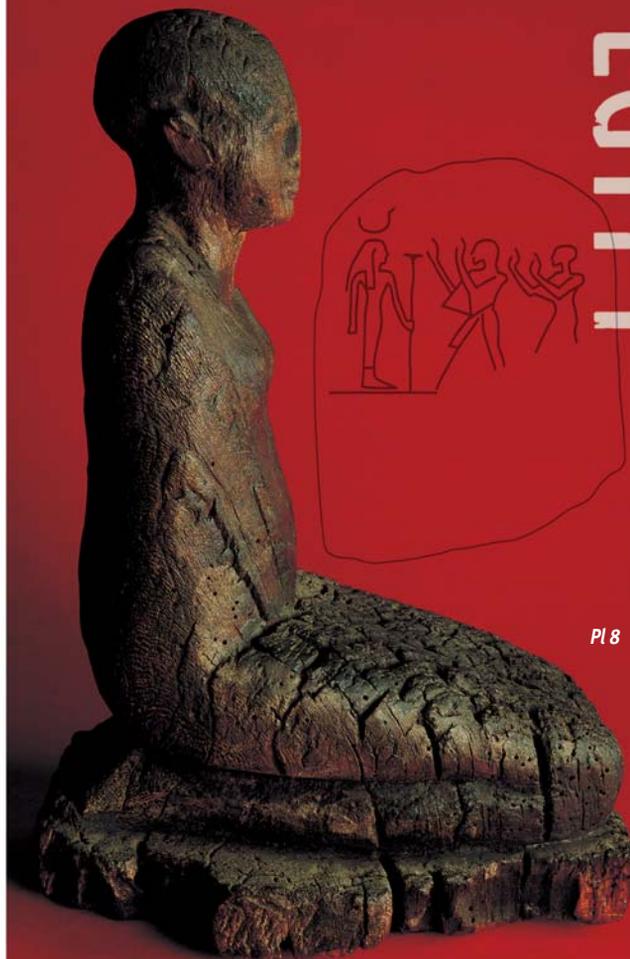
Wooden figure of a kneeling person

(Pl 8)

Provenance unknown
Twenty-sixth Dynasty, 664-525 BC

Wooden sculpture of this type and period is extremely rare; the surviving examples probably all come from tombs. The kneeling posture might indicate the piety of the deceased.

ANCIENT EGYPT



Pl 8

MUMMIFICATION AND THE TOMB

The fundamental Egyptian belief in life after death centred on the gods Osiris, who in myth was revived to become king of the dead, and Ra, the sun-god. Every Egyptian wanted to be identified with Osiris after death so that the body might dwell safely in his underworld, and that the spirit might travel eternally through the sky with Ra.

Survival depended on uniting body and spirit and keeping the body intact in the ground. The Egyptians developed techniques of mummification to prevent the body from rotting. These were perfected by *c.1000 BC*. The body was dried out in natron, a natural sodium compound while the soft inner parts were removed and preserved separately. The body was anointed, stuffed and wrapped in layers of torn linen cloths.

The tomb fulfilled two functions, housing the preserved body and providing a space for offerings to the dead. In rich tombs the burial chamber was usually deep under ground with an elaborate brick or stone chapel above for offerings. Both parts could be inscribed with religious texts to ensure the survival of the deceased, above all by an eternal supply of offerings. At different periods different types of objects were placed in the burial chamber beside the coffin to guarantee the prospects for a good afterlife. From the late Middle Kingdom until the Ptolemaic, Period *c.1850-30 BC*, small figures of the dead person, called *shabtis*, were included in burials to perform any manual tasks which might be required of the deceased in the underworld (*Pl 9*).



Funerary statuettes (*shabtis*)

(*Pl 9*)

Ancient Egyptians were under an obligation to labour on behalf of the state. This concept extended to the afterlife, where the dead might be required to perform agricultural work for the gods. Figurines of wood, stone, faience or pottery were placed in the tomb to carry out such tasks in place of the owner.

AFTER THE PHARAOKS:

Ptolemaic, Roman and early Christian Egypt

In *332 BC* Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, then a province of the Persian Empire. When Alexander died, the general Ptolemy became ruler of Egypt, proclaiming himself king in *305 BC*. The land was now governed by a Greek-speaking court at the new city of Alexandria. Gradually Greek culture eclipsed Pharaonic writing, costume and jewellery. Roman occupation, following the defeat and suicide of Cleopatra in *30 BC*, cemented this change. By the third century AD life in Egypt was similar to that in other eastern Roman provinces.

Funerary practices were among the latest Pharaonic traditions to survive. Embalmers in Roman Egypt often mummified bodies very imperfectly paying most attention to the appearance of the wrappings. An idealised headpiece provided an eternal image of the deceased in either Pharaonic or Mediterranean style. In the Fayum area, many mummies had a Roman style portrait, painted on wood, inserted into the wrappings. Some of these images are strikingly realistic (*Pl 10*).

By the fourth century AD Egypt had converted to Christianity. Egyptian Christians were called Copts, probably from the Greek word *Aiguptios* meaning Egyptian. Egypt remained a province of the Eastern Roman (*Byzantine*) Empire until the Arab conquest in *640 AD*. Under Arab rule the majority of the population converted to Islam and Arabic replaced the Egyptian language. By the fifteenth century AD Egyptian was no longer spoken outside the Coptic Church and that last link with the past was lost.



Mummy of a young woman with encaustic portrait

(*Pl 10*)

From Hawara

First-second century AD