3.3: Early Egyptian Dynasty (3150 BCE – 2686 BCE)

The Egyptian culture was born on the banks of the Nile River and lower delta where water was plentiful and supported life for thousands of people. The fertile soil provided productive land for farming due to the harnessing of the Nile River. Around 3500 BCE, the Pre-dynastic people were the first civilizations in Egypt who united Lower Egypt, including the delta, and Upper Egypt, the narrow upstream part of the valley where most of the early Egyptians lived. They evolved into the Early Egyptian Dynasty, a refined civilization, exploiting copper and other natural resources and adept at farming, irrigation processes, and flood control, generating a surplus of food supplies. Without the need to continually search for food as hunter-gathers did, the Egyptians now had time to direct their talents into the arts, producing some of the most exquisite early civilization surviving artifacts.

The Early Egyptian Dynasty’s belief in multiple gods drove the ingenuity to construct massive tombs for the pharaohs, ensuring the survival of their souls in the afterlife. Ample supplies of stone for building the massive pyramid structures and carving the temples were available. Each pharaoh fabricated a more elaborate tomb than the previous ruler. Artists recorded the pharaoh’s life on the walls of the tombs in elaborate low-relief painted carvings, the heads of people always carved in a sideways profile, even though their body may be facing forward, a prominent Egyptian art method.

One of the oldest pieces of Egyptian art, the Palette of Narmer (3.7), was found buried in the Temple of Hierakonpolis, an important site in Egyptian history and the foundation for the Egyptian dynasties that followed. The Palette of King Narmer, made of black slate with low-relief carvings, contains images historians portray the unification of lower and upper parts of Egypt into one dynasty. The Palette decorated with the names of the kings and insignias representing both Lower and Upper Egypt.
In 2611 BCE, Pharaoh Djoser had a step pyramid built for his tomb on the Giza plateau, a sandy desert with a dry climate located on the west banks of the Nile River. It began as a traditionally built mastaba (a rectangular house of eternity, built of mud bricks and a flat roof), however, after his 19-year reign, the design and architecture changed, and it became the first stepped pyramid tomb. The new tomb provided the foundation and design for future pharaohs and how the pyramid tombs will be constructed from this day forward. It was the first time stone is incorporated into buildings; the stone a substantially more durable material compared to the mud bricks used in mastabas. The step pyramid of Djoser (3.8) was a six-stepped pyramid with multiple rooms and temples, standing just over 200 feet, the largest most massive building of its time with perfectly balanced placement of each step to support the next step. The Egyptians were masters of design (3.9) and engineering, placing the tomb chambers for Djoser underground, hidden in a maze of hallways to discourage tomb raiders.
The oldest and largest surviving sculpture in the world is the Great Sphinx (3.10), located on the Giza Plateau. The face of the Sphinx believed to be the face of Pharaoh Khafra, whose tomb is the second largest pyramid and located directly behind the Sphinx. The Sphinx is a mythical creature with a human head (King Khafra) balanced on top (3.11) of a massive lion’s body. The body carved from seven layers of geologically layered bedrock at the site, shaped like a lion lying down with his front paws extended. The head was carved from the natural limestone blocks and added to the body.
There are three large pyramids in the Giza Plateau (3.12) built by the Early Egyptian Dynasty pharaohs, the largest known as King Khufu’s Pyramid (3.13), and two slightly smaller pyramids for King Menkaure and King Khafre. There are also several smaller pyramids for the queens and sisters of the kings scattered around the three more massive pyramids. The pyramids are all aligned to the north, the largest pyramid used over 2.3 million stone blocks. These massive stones weighed from 2.5 to 9 tons each and were carved from a quarry then transported to the building site at Giza. Each pyramid contained burial chambers; however, the king generally buried in the exact center of the tomb, protected at the access point by a sliding granite block system to elude thieves. The pyramid built over 30 years and historians still do not have a real theory about the building process or how the stones were moved and lifted.
3.12 Giza pyramids

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One of the best examples of Early Egyptian Dynasty carvings is the Menkaure and Khamerernebty statue (3.14). The statue is dated to 2490 BCE and carved from slate depicting the pharaoh Menkaure and his queen, discovered in the early 20th century in a hole left by tomb raiders. The Menkaure piece represents the entire body from the top of their heads to their feet yet excludes the back half of the couple. Carved in the round from a solid piece of slate, one can walk around the statue. It forms the back of the statue, rendering the statues encased in a frozen form. The two figures are three quarters released from the stone in the front, and although there is no space between the two figures, this is the first time actual life-like statues in seen in a proper perspective. They each have a foot extended forward, giving movement to the statue.
3.14 Menkaure and Khamerernebty
One of the most beautifully decorated tombs is the well-preserved Tomb of Ti, an old mastaba. On the walls leading to the burial shaft of Ti’s sarcophagus were outstanding carved relief scenes of everyday life in the Early Egyptian Dynasty. On the central portion of the offering, the hall depicts a hippopotamus hunt with Ti standing in a reed boat overseeing the hunt, surrounded by water with fish, crocodiles, and hippopotamus. The larger than life-size statue of Ti (3.15) was found outside of one of the doors.

Egyptians used pottery for utilitarian purposes, holding food, water, and oil, but also made pottery for decoration. Most of the clay used for pottery was a reddish-brown color and came directly from the Nile River silt. The abundant clay often used to produce plates, bowls, serving platters, and vessels. The potter’s wheel came into use around 2700 BCE; however, it rotated by hand and not by the foot. The Egyptians still used pinch pot or coil pot methods on the potter’s wheel. The serving plate (3.16) is decorated with typical images in the period of a hippopotamus and a crocodile while the jar (3.17) displays encircled gazelles.
The Early Egyptian Dynasty created a very sophisticated culture built upon farming and trade, relying on the supportive environment of the vast Nile River basin. Their primary diet was wheat, which they made into bread and beer, along with other crops of onions, garlic, cabbage, lentils, plums, and grapes. They raised cattle, goats, pigs, ducks, and sheep for milk, meat, and hides. Processing wheat for bread and beer required fermentation, and breweries discovered in ruins dating back to 3500 BCE, the oldest known breweries in the world. Over several centuries, the united Egyptians became a cultural and economic powerhouse using the Nile River to its fullest capacities. The ancient Egyptians were indebted to the Nile River, and their coexistence was a necessity for survival.