

Ten wicked-awesome things to know about ancient Egypt

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1. EGYPTIAN TIMELINE:

- Ancient Egyptian civilization was one of the earliest, and longest lasting, civilizations in world history
- Farming in the Nile valley was underway by around 5000 BC
- Egyptian “history”—as historians tend to view it--started around 3100 BC when King Narmer unified Upper and Lower Egypt, and writing emerges shortly after this
- The Old Kingdom emerges around 2700, building the pyramids around 2600 BC.
- Egyptian chronology consists of three “Kingdoms” (Old, Middle and New) with intervening “Intermediate Periods,” a “Late Period” and short periods of occupation by foreign powers, including the Nubians, Assyrians and Persians.
- The Heyday of Egyptian power is generally seen to last from about 3000-1000 BC, at which time the New Kingdom is in decline
- Alexander the great conquers Egypt in 332 BC, eventually leaving the Ptolemy family in power.
- Cleopatra was the last Ptolemy: she fell to the Romans, dying in 30 AD.
- So this stretch of history, 3000BC – 30BC – was nearly a thousand years longer than the period between Cleopatra’s death and the present day.
- Of course Egyptian “history” doesn’t end here, as Egypt has always been a vital culture, benefiting from a variety of influences.

2. THE NILE:

- River flows North (so up on a map)
- Generally regarded as the longest river in world (until 2007, when the Amazon was deemed longer)
- Egypt is desert so the river sustained life, which couldn’t have existed without it; indeed, many historians argue it was the Nile that enabled the birth of Egyptian civilization
- The Nile made possible trade, travel, communication, food, water, etc.
- It has 2 major tributaries, the White Nile which starts as far away as Rwanda, and the Blue Nile, which starts in Ethiopia.
- The English name Nile, and Arabic name en-Nil, both come from the Greek Νεῖλος and Latin Nilos.
- The god Hapi was the Egyptian god of the annual flood of the Nile, which fed the land

3. WRITING:

- Writing begins around 3000 BC in Egypt and Mesopotamia, with some debate over which civilization got there first: the earliest examples of hieroglyphs date to several hundred years before this.
- Ancient Egyptians thought writing was magic; indeed, hieroglyphs were called *mdw-w-ntr* ("gods words") by the ancient Egyptians. Our word hieroglyphs comes from the Greek adjective *ἱερογλυφικός* (*hieroglyphikos*), a compound of *ἱερός* (*hierós* 'sacred') and *γλύφω* (*glýphō* 'I carve, engrave').
- There were hundreds of hieroglyphs, versus our 26 letters.
- Hieroglyphs can be written any direction, left to right, right to left, up to down, down to up, often depending on surrounding images (hint: read into the bird beaks to read right direction).
- Cartouches, as the cartouche of Tutankhamun shown on this slide, were used to enclose the names of kings, and, at some points, other elites, and symbolized the totality of what the sun encircles, correlated with the king's power.
- Only about 1% of population could read.
- Hieroglyphs continued to be used until around 400 AD, at which time non-Christian temples were closed and the monumental use of hieroglyphs at this time were no longer needed.
- Understanding of the writing system was lost for centuries, until Jean-Francois Champollion used the Rosetta Stone to decipher hieroglyphs in the 1820s.

4. GODS:

- For ancient Egyptians, the world was mysterious and they sometimes experienced the world around them as unknowable, even frightening. Many turned to the gods and goddesses, representations of the natural and supernatural world, for help understanding their own world.
- There are thousands of gods and goddesses' names attested, although perhaps approximately 100 who were broadly worshipped across time.
- Although most had human forms, many were often depicted as animal or part animal, generally with human bodies and animal heads when so depicted. But the depictions of Egyptian gods are as diverse as the gods themselves: my personal favorites were the "tree goddesses" shown as part woman, part tree.
- Many gods had a political power, aiding the Pharaohs in their rule.
- But many gods were employed by regular people to help with life's challenges, like cure a cold, help babies come safely into world, help people make more money, attract a mate and more.

5. PYRAMIDS:

- The Pyramids were built nearly 5000 yrs ago, around 2600 BC during the Old and Middle Kingdoms.
- There are over 100 known pyramids, most built as tombs for the Pharaohs and Queens, although the Great Pyramids of Giza are the most famous; indeed the Great Pyramid is one of the Seven Wonders of the World.
- All pyramids were built on the west bank of the Nile, the site of the setting sun, which is associated with the realm of the dead.
- They were not quickly perfected: the earliest examples are stepped.
- The shape of the pyramid is believed to represent the Primordial Mound, from which the Egyptians believed the earth was created.
- The shape also represents the descending rays of the sun. Underlining this, pyramids were polished white limestone so they were brilliant and bright like the sun. And the names given to the various pyramids often included words like “shining.”
- It is generally believed that the pyramids were a kind of “resurrection machine” designed to launch the king’s soul into the realm of the gods. One piece of evidence support this idea is the narrow shaft that extends from the burial chamber of the Great Pyramid through the entire pyramid, pointing towards an area of the night sky associated with the gateway to the beyond.
- Spells to help king’s soul transition into afterlife were carved in the walls.

6. TOMBS:

- Many ancient Egyptians, especially those with financial resources and skills, spent significant time and resources during their lifetimes preparing their tombs, ensuring the right spells and tomb goods would be available to them after death so that they could have a better afterlife
- In fact, tombs were so important for individual Egyptians that they were often built out of more durable materials than Egyptian homes. This makes sense, because ancient Egyptians believed their tombs were houses meant to last an eternity, versus the fleeting time spent in homes on this earth.
- Tombs were filled with magic spells, artwork, and artifacts all designed to help people navigate the afterworld. For example, it was very common for tomb spells to ask for people to say the name of deceased and leave bread and beer to strengthen the deceased.
- Families were celebrated in the tombs in different ways, commonly shown on tomb walls. There were even False Doors designed for the spirit of the deceased to move between this world and the afterworld.

- Tomb types change throughout Egyptian history but in most periods the elite spend significant resources on these beautiful structures. One of my faves were the New Kingdom small pyramids, that mimic the earlier pyramids of the kings, as the ones shown here.

7. MUMMIES:

- Early in Egyptian history, Egyptians buried their dead in small desert pits. The dryness of the sand and the heat dehydrated the bodies, creating lifelike, natural “mummies.”
- Eventually, Egyptians began burying their dead in coffins to protect the bodies from desert animals. But they learned that those bodies decayed when they weren’t exposed to hot, dry, desert sand.
- The process of mummification then developed to preserve bodies so they would be more lifelike. The process included embalming the bodies – removing all sources of moisture from within the body and preserving the body with natron and oils-- and wrapping the bodies in linen strips.
- Mummification became a very complicated process, with a caste of priests dedicated to the process that could take up to 70 days. All internal organs were removed but the heart, which was believed to be the source of intelligence and emotion.
- The purpose of mummification was to keep the body as similar as possible to how it was in life, to aid in the afterlife experience.
- Animals, such as birds and cats, were also mummified. There were a few reasons for animal mummification: 1) to allow pets access to the afterworld, 2) to provide food for the deceased in the afterworld, 3) as an offering for particular gods, r) and in some cases because the animal was closely associated with a god, such as cats to several goddesses.

8. GOLD:

- Gold was extremely popular in ancient Egypt and in very high demand not only as a sign of status and wealth, but as a religious symbol.
- Egyptians believed that the gods had skin of gold. Gold was a divine metal, particularly associated with the sun god, Re, who was sometimes called “the mountain of gold.” And the Pharaohs were called “The Golden Horus.”
- There were two main sources of Egyptian gold: Nubia to the south and the eastern desert.
- Gold was used in a variety of ways, such as in jewelry and amulets and even the gold sandals and toe and finger stalls shown here (from the tomb of minor wives of the 18th Dynasty Tutankhamun III).
- The tomb of the boy king, Tutankhamun, is a great example of gold in ancient Egypt, including his famous gold mask, shown here.

9. MAGIC:

- For ancient Egyptians, magic was not only real but was a reliable and widely available resource for dealing with common problems, such as marital strife, health problems, and financial crisis.
- The power of magic allowed people to access the supernatural realm, usually via spells or artifacts such as amulets, as those shown here.
- There are a huge variety of magic texts and artifacts. Shown here, as example, is a Horus Cippi on the left, which depicts the child god Horus, with the god Bes shown above him, conquering the forces of chaos: one would pour water over the god then mine it from the base, at which time it would be magically imbued with the gods' power. The wooden artifact at the top of the page is a pillow, inscribed with spells for sweet sleep and security through the night.
- The Egyptian word for magic was Heka. Heka was also the god of magic. The word means "activation" or "action of the *Ka*" (the *Ka* was similar to our notion of soul).

10. TEMPLES

- Temples were seen as houses of the gods; some were built to commemorate Pharaohs.
- There were hundreds of temples scattered throughout the country, most were very colorful, full of statues and carved walls but some were smaller, local shrines.
- Temple sites were often chosen for religious reasons, for example a belief that a god was born or buried on the site. Commonly, temples were built on top of previous temples.
- Larger temples were built so that the larger, open spaces at the front of temples were available to larger audiences. Space and accessibility shrunk as one moved through the temple with the small sanctuaries that housed the cult statue, usually golden statues of the gods.
- Some temples had a kind of back door to this secret sanctuary. These "hearing ear" chapels were located directly behind the sanctuary, which allowed those who were not purified, the common people, indirect access to the inner sanctuary, and the god within. The chapels may include a state of the god or simply carved ears, designed to ensure the god on the other side of the wall could hear the peoples' prayers.
- Temples were sites of ritual activities, with high priests and priestesses performing hidden rituals in the secret parts of the temples, but large festivals open to all the people conducted in the more public, front areas.
- During some festivals the gods travelled in floats to visit each other at their temple homes.