

Egypt in the Old Kingdom **The British Museum**

The pyramids and tombs of Egypt's Old Kingdom (Third to Sixth Dynasties, about 2686-2181 BC), with their magnificent reliefs, paintings, statues and stelae, have often been seen as the epitome of the whole of ancient Egypt. Indeed, if the Early Dynastic period was the formative period in which the bases of Egyptian civilization were firmly established, the Old Kingdom was when it came of age.

From the Fourth Dynasty, the administration of the country was highly organised, controlled by civil servants from the royal residence at Memphis, where the king was supreme. The efficiency of the administration is no better exemplified than in the building of the pyramids: it is estimated that the Great Pyramid when complete contained about 2,300,000 blocks of stone of an average weight of 2½ tons, all of which had to be transported from quarry to site.

This tour features objects from the period in the British Museum's collection, including remains of the fabric of the early royal pyramids, architectural elements and sculpture from the tombs of the officials that ran the country and a papyrus from one of the most important administrative archives of the period.

Faience tile from the Step Pyramid of Djoser



While brick remained the basic building material of structures for living in, whether palaces or the houses of the ordinary people, stone was gradually introduced for temples and the tombs of royalty and the élite. Of the new stone structures, most striking were the massive stone pyramid complexes built as burial-places for the king and his royal family.

The earliest pyramid (and the world's first monumental structure in stone) was the Step Pyramid built by the royal architect Imhotep for King Djoser in the Third Dynasty (about 2686-2613 BC). It comprised six steps reaching a height of 63.7 metres. It was also the first royal tomb to receive some form of decoration. This tile was one of many which decorated the entrances to rooms in a maze of corridors within the pyramid. The rooms and tiled areas were mirrored in an underground area in the southern part of the pyramid complex, known as the 'South Tomb'. This was not in fact used for burial, but built as a symbolic representation of southern Egypt.

Approximately 36,000 tiles of this type were used in these two tomb areas. They were made to resemble the reed matting of the king's palace at Memphis. Reeds had symbolic meaning in ancient Egypt; they grew out of the waters from which the world was created. Furthermore, the blue-green colour of faience was associated with re-birth and new life.

Limestone block from the pyramid of Khufu



The Step Pyramid of Djoser was followed by the famous pyramids at Giza built as tombs for kings Khufu (Greek: Kheops or Cheops), Khafre (Khephren) and Menkaure (Mycerinus) in the Fourth Dynasty (about 2613-2494 BC).

The pyramids were built mainly of limestone quarried on the Giza plateau itself. The pyramids of Khufu and Khafre were also given a final casing of fine limestone cut to the shape of the blocks, in order that the pyramid would appear smooth-sided rather than stepped.

Only a few large casing blocks survive around the base of the Great Pyramid of Khufu, although there is a considerable area surviving near the apex of the pyramid of Khafre. Menkaure intended to case his pyramid in granite from Aswan, although it is unlikely that it was ever finished.

It was not until the Fifth Dynasty (about 2494-2345 BC) that the pyramid chambers, previously undecorated, were carved with elaborate *Pyramid Texts*, religious and magical utterances that were intended to facilitate the king's journey to the Afterlife and the journey of the sun through the sky.

Relief from the mastaba of Werirenptah



Close to the pyramids were mortuary temples surrounded by large cemeteries of *mastaba* tombs for the burials of high officials and tombs cut out of the rock for minor family members, courtiers, minor officials and priests.

A *mastaba* is a type of free-standing tomb used for both royal and private burials. They are rectangular in plan, with the sides sloping in and a flat-topped mud-brick or stone superstructure containing offering chambers, all placed over a shaft leading to a subterranean burial chamber.

This example belonged to Werirenptah, a man who was a middle-ranking official, and who held the title of 'priest of Re and Hathor in the sun-temple of [King] Neferirkare'. Such priests were not those who carried out the daily rituals, but officials who had been favoured by the king by being allowed to receive some of the revenues from that temple.

The *mastaba* consists of a main wall with two false doors that serve as offering places. The false doors are accompanied by scenes of offering, butchers, and also dancing and music-making. Other walls show agricultural scenes and preparation of the funeral equipment.

Limestone false door of Ptahshepses



The capital of Egypt during the Old Kingdom was Memphis (also known as Men-nefer ('established and beautiful') and Ineb-hedj ('white walls'), as it had been during the Early Dynastic period (about 3100-2613 BC) . Memphis is located to the south of the junction between the Nile valley and the Delta. The necropolis (cemetery) associated with the city stretches for over thirty kilometres along the west bank of the Nile and includes the famous sites of Giza and Saqqara.

The 'false door' was a standard feature of tombs in the Memphis region. This is a particularly large and impressive example of the 'palace façade' type, so-called after the royal brick palaces that were thought to look like this.

Ptahshepses was a high priest of Ptah and, according to the two right-hand columns of text, one of the royal children of the reigns of Menkaure and Shepseskaf, the last two major kings of the Fourth Dynasty (about 2613-2494 BC). If the four remaining large columns had another royal name at the top, Ptahshepses' career would extend at least until the reign of Niuserre in the Fifth Dynasty. There is even a mention of a temple of Niuserre's successor Menkauhor. It is possible then that Ptahshepses lived from about 2490 to about 2400 BC, a very long life for anyone at that time.

Painted limestone statue of Nynofretmin



The tombs of private individuals often had a dedicated statue-chamber, usually known by the Arabic term *serdab*. In these were placed free-standing statues of the deceased. Once there, the statues would only have been seen by mortuary priests and relatives when they came to make offerings at the tomb. Their purpose was to provide a home for the *ka* in the event that the body was destroyed, thus keeping the memory and personality of the deceased alive.

In this example Nynofretmin is shown seated on a cube-shaped seat with a high back. An inscription giving her name and titles is carved on the side. The title of 'royal acquaintance' suggests that she had some contact with the king. Several elements of the statue follow the artistic tradition of the Old Kingdom. The figure's large feet, short neck and heavy features are typical of statues of the period. On the face are visible traces of the yellowish-brown skin colour traditionally used for female figures. The heavy braided wig, with a central parting and the tightly fitting white sheath dress were popular in the Fourth Dynasty (about 2613-2494 BC).

Limestone statue of Katep and Hetepheres



This is another example of a statue that would have been placed in a statue-chamber in a tomb. However, instead of an individual, this is a 'pair-statue', which allows us an insight into the ancient Egyptian conventions in the depiction of men and women. Though very close in appearance, Katep and Hetepheres are clearly distinguished through skin colour and the broadness of Katep's shoulders.

The inscriptions tell us that Katep was a relatively minor priest, though he did hold the title of 'priest of Khufu', the Fourth Dynasty king and builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza. Thus Katep was a priest who served in, or benefited from Khufu's mortuary cult, in temples associated with the royal pyramid.

Limestone relief from a tomb



During the Old Kingdom, there was a proliferation of relief carving on the walls of tomb chapels, ranging from standard, though important, offering scenes, through to more unusual ones such as those on this relief. Offering scenes were intended to act as a continuation of the actual provisions placed as offerings in the tomb chapel, while scenes of 'daily life' would also help to commemorate and project the personality of the tomb owner into the next world.

The carving is divided into three registers. At the top are representations of boat-builders, while at the bottom are scenes of harvesting at the left and fishing at the right. The central register is more unusual. At the left are musicians and some boys with sticks, one of whom wears a lion mask; at the right seem to be a group of boys wrestling under a shelter. The boy with the mask may represent a forerunner to the lion-maned Bes, Egyptian god of fertility and many other basic human concerns. The scene has been interpreted as a harvest rite, a protective rite, or possibly a rite that took place at the onset of puberty

Red granite sarcophagus



Once the Egyptian élite progressed from the practice of burying the dead in simple pits in the ground, it was not long before they developed the concept of a full-length container for the body. Early examples of wood or ceramic gave way to the stone sarcophagus early in the Old Kingdom. This example is made of granite, one of the hardest stones available to the Egyptians, and is common from the Fourth Dynasty (about 2613-2494 BC) onwards.

The exterior of the sarcophagus is decorated with a panelling known as 'palace façade', so called because it was based on the mud-brick façade of the early Egyptian palace. At the ends of each long side is a small false door, to enable the spirits to gain access to and from the body inside. The top is rounded, and there are remains of protrusions on the ends to enable the lid to be lifted.

According to the German Egyptologist Karl Richard Lepsius (1810-84), this sarcophagus came from a shaft in tomb number 28 at Giza, the precise location of which is unclear. It then disappeared into private hands, only surfacing in 1990, when it was acquired by the British Museum.

Wooden model of servants preparing food



From the end of the Old Kingdom until the Twelfth Dynasty (that is, between about 2300 and 1800 BC), it was common practice for small wooden models of servants to be placed in tombs. The figures represented the household attendants and other servants of the deceased, and were supposed to act as magical substitutes for the persons they represented.

Most of the models depict activities connected with the production of food, drink and other basic necessities of life. With a group of these models in his tomb, the dead man was then assured of having everything he might need during the Afterlife. The figures in this group include a man squatting to cook meat on a spit, while another seems to be pouring a libation (a liquid offering to a god) from a jar over a small offering table.

Wooden tomb statue of Tjeti



At the end of the Fifth and into the Sixth Dynasty (about 2345-2181 BC) there were new types of private burials, in which the statues, instead of being above ground in statue chambers, were placed underground in the tomb shaft or the burial chamber. These statues, mostly in wood, are typically quite small with characteristically mannered physiognomies and anatomies.

Uniquely in the history of Egyptian representations of the élite, these statue sometimes show men and women naked. This normally indicates lower status, but here it might symbolize youth through rebirth; this style may have been a short-lived fashion for statues of very high officials.

While these wooden tomb statues are usually slightly crudely carved, here the sculptor has carefully modelled the muscles on the torso and legs, and paid close attention to the detail of the face.

Tjeti's name and titles are inscribed on the base. These suggest that the statue originally came from the region of the town Akhmim in Upper Egypt, and specifically the necropolis (cemetery) of el-Hawawish which is associated with Akhmim in the Old Kingdom. Several tombs of men called Tjeti have been found there.

Ebony statue of Meryrahashtef



This is one of several wooden statues found in the tomb of Meryrahashtef, an overseer of farmers in the provincial town of Sedment. The tombs of wealthy individuals of the late Old Kingdom often contained a group of such statues showing the owner in a range of poses and costumes.

As with the statue of Tjeti, Meryrahashtef is shown naked, probably a reference to the hope for rebirth. Meryrahashtef is shown as a young man, though his skeleton shows that he reached maturity. This idealization is typical of Egyptian art, which sought to represent everything in its most perfect form. The carving of the muscles, particularly on the chest and legs conveys an impression of activity.

An unusual feature is that the statue is carved from a single piece of wood, rather than having the arms made separately and attached with mortice and tenon joints. The quality of the carving of this statue suggests that it was made by a master craftsman. Finely-carved wooden statues were probably not considered inferior to stone ones, as wood was a precious commodity in Egypt due to its scarcity.

Papyrus from the Abusir papyri



Texts provide a great deal of information about the funerary beliefs, administrative systems and economy of the time. The first funerary texts, the *Pyramid Texts*, spells for the well-being of the king, were inscribed in the royal pyramids from the Fifth Dynasty (about 2494-2345 BC). Autobiographical texts in tombs of this period allow non-royal individuals to be identified for the first time.

This fragment of papyrus comes from the papyrus archive in the funerary temple dedicated to the cult of King Neferikare Kakai (2446-2426 BC) in his pyramid complex at Abusir. Together the papyri are the most important set of administrative documents to survive from Old Kingdom Egypt, revealing detailed information about the running of a royal mortuary establishment. They include duty rosters for priests, lists of offerings and inventories of temple equipment, as well as letters and permits.

This fragment bears the remains of two different texts. The introduction begins with a date, which at this time was expressed in the number of national cattle-counts in the king's reign. These censuses usually took place every two years. The number of cattle-counts given here is fourteen, which might be interpreted as the twenty-eighth year of the king's reign. The reign may be that of King Izezi (about 2494-2345 BC) near the end of the Fifth Dynasty.

Limestone relief slab from the tomb of Rehotep



In order to gain power the priests of different cities developed individual theologies, each one aiming to place their own god as the centre of the creation of the universe. Iunu (Greek: Heliopolis), situated near modern Cairo, emerged as an important spiritual and political centre, centred on the cult of Atum, who became equated with the sun-god Re. The city's cosmogony (creation myth) and Great Ennead (grouping of nine gods) - Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Nephthys and Seth - remained influential for many centuries.

This slab comes from the tomb of Rehotep, a son of the Fourth-Dynasty king Sneferu, who served as a high priest at Heliopolis. Rehotep married Princess Nefret, and their twin mastabas were built near the Mejdum pyramid. Stunning limestone statues of the pair are now in the Cairo Museum. The British Museum contains this fragment of an offering niche or false door from the tomb.

Rehotep is seated in front of a table of bread, above which are inscribed the names of some important offerings, such as incense, eye-paint, wine and dates. To the right of that is a list of linen, surmounted by three hawks. Other offerings are named at the bottom.