Egyptian Civilization Essay, Research Paper

The Egyptian Civilization

Egyptian civilization formed along the Nile river and the earliest traces of

human life in that region are from the Paleolithic Age, (Old Stone Age), about

300,000 B.C., at the very edges of the Nile Valley. Beyond, on both sides of the

river the land was and still is desert.

At that time the people moved from place to place, ate berries, roots, and

any animals they could find, but stood close to their lifeline, the Nile. The lands

along the Nile were rich enough to be farmed, so over time the people started to

grow crops. They found ways to store the yearly floodwaters and then use them

for the dry seasons. The farmers learned to lift water out of the Nile or wells and

send it across the fields through a system of canals. In order for all of this to

work out they had to work together, no one could do any of it alone. So as the

farmers and people began to cooperate, an organization began to grow. They

found leaders among them who directed the work. A form of government

developed and due to that they soon began to build cities, to manufacture

things, in time to trade with their neighbors. That is how it all started. Over a

period from 3100 B.C. to 332 B.C. they grew in culture, arts, religion, science,

medicine, and many other fields.

The early Egyptian people grew food by the Nile and lived mainly by

hunting for meat, fishing, and gathering wild plants. They kept a small number of

cattle, sheep, or goats, and grew a few crops. Their crops were flax, barley, and

a primitive kind of wheat called ‘emmer.’ They got the sheep and goats from the

middle east, and their crops too. Farming provided most of the food and helped

their population grow. Later on in time, the basic diet of the ordinary people was

bread and beer. The wealthier ones ate more meat and drank wine instead of

beer.

The most common clothes women wore were tunic dresses. Those were

made by folding a rectangle of cloth in half, sewing it up at the sides, leaving

holes for the arms, and cutting a key hole for the head. Some had sleeves and

some were sleeveless. This looks very different from the tomb paintings where

women are shown wearing skintight transparent dresses with no underclothes. I

guess they wanted the art more attractive.

Men usually wore loin-cloths and short kilts. Much of the people’s clothes

were made of linen because for the mostly hot weather they needed light, loose,

and easily washed clothes. Linen was perfect for that.

Children went naked whenever it was warm enough. At about the age of

10 they started to wear the same kind of tunics or kilts as their parents.

Egyptian doctors were the most famous in the ancient world. Today some

scholars call them ?the first real doctors.? The people who were doctors were

often priests as well. They were trained in the temple medical schools. Their

medicine was a mixture of science, religion, and magic. In many kingdoms all

over the Mediterranean if medical help was needed their services were at

demand. Their medical writings include all sorts of magic charms and chants, but

they had a lot of practical knowledge. They knew how to deal with broken bones,

wounds, and fevers. It is said that they approached their study of medicine in a

remarkably scientific way.

An example of likely treatment in those early times is the binding of a slice

of raw meat over a stitched wound. Also wounds were treated with willow leaves,

which contain salicylic acid (aspirin), to reduce inflammation, plus copper,

sodium salts to help dry up the wound. Cream and flour were mixed to make a

cast for a broken limb. With very bad diseases, where they didn’t understand the

cause, magic spells were mixed with the potions. Even if the magic didn?t work

itself the patient felt a little better just thinking it might work.

There are many gods and goddesses to be found in the beliefs of ancient

Egypt. The gods were associated with individual provinces, and their names

varied throughout the country.

The basic belief of most Egyptians was that in the beginning there was

only water. Then, just as happened after the Nile floods every year, the first

mound of earth rose out of the waters of chaos. What they believed happened

next depended on where they lived. There were common gods to all though. For

ordinary families most important in their daily lives were the household

Demigods: Thoueris the hippopotamus, and the little frog Hetak, who helped at

childbirth; the seven Hathors who protected children; Renenvet, the cobra

goddess of the harvest; and, most of all ugly dwarf Bes, who brought good luck

to everyone. People painted images of these gods on their walls or wore them as

good luck charms.

They believed that everyone had several parts. The ka; spiritual double,

created at birth and released from the body at death. The ba; soul, and the akh;

supernatural power. As long as the body was preserved, the ka and ba would

live. That is why they carefully mummified their dead and laid them in tombs

where offerings of food could be made, which would nourish the ka. Once in the

tomb it was believed that the akh began its journey to the hall of judgment. The

god Anubis held the person?s heart in one pan in another a feather of Ma?at, the

goddess of justice. The more crimes the dead person admitted to, the heavier

the heart. If it outweighed the feather, then the Gobbler, a monster made of lion,

crocodile, and hippo, swallowed it and it became an evil spirit, forever fighting

the gods. If it passed the test it went with Osiris to live in the fields of Yalu, a

place like Egypt only more beautiful. They had a saying; ?He who reaches the

other world without wrongdoing shall exist there like a god.?

There were several festivals during the year where people could get

closer to their god. Sometimes a statue of the god would be paraded around the

temple walls carried in a closed shrine on a golden boat.

Some of Ancient Egypt?s most remarkable achievements were in

architecture and engineering, especially in designing plus building the great

pyramids. In Egypt there are more than 80 pyramids which experts believe are

the tombs built by pharaohs, as the final resting place for their body. The finest

sculptors, masons, engineers, and countless laborers spent years building the

tombs. They were not slaves but farmers who believed that if they help their king

get to heaven, he would look after them in the next world.

They produced objects of superb workmanship in stone, copper, gold, and

wood. Jewelry was among the most popular things. The paintings inside the

tombs were decorated by teams of craftsmen. Those paintings were believed to

be partly magic. Things painted were believed to become real in the afterworld

so they showed them as clearly as possible.

Their art is what makes ancient Egyptians popular today among other

things. What they are also known by is their writing and calculations. They used

a form of writing called hieroglyphics. The script is made of about 750 signs

which include pictures of people, animals, plants, and objects. The last priests

who wrote in this way died in about A.D. 400, and the ability to read

hieroglyphics died with them.

The Egyptians were a practical people, and to them knowledge was

important because it was useful. They needed ways to measure their fields, and

predict the size of their crops, and figure out supplies, so they created a simple

arithmetic and geometry. There were only 7 signs for numbers. There was no

zero and no multiplication or division. To multiply they added the number to itself

as many times as needed. They did use fractions.

They developed engineering and numerical skills in building the

pyramids. Their concern with religion and the need for arranging a calendar of

festivals led to their interest in astronomy. By careful observation, they learned

the movements of some stars, and charted the skies.

One of their greatest achievements was their creation of a calendar. It is

very close to the ones we have today. They set the beginning of the year on the

day the Nile began to rise because that was the most important event to them.

Astronomers noticed that the Nile?s rising happened at the same time the

brightest star in the sky (Sirrus, the Dog Star) rose with the sun. By counting the

number of days until the Dog Star again rose at dawn, they worked out a

calendar of 365 days. They learned they needed to correct the calendar every

so often by adding extra days, as we add a day in leap years. They also divided

day and night into 12 parts, hours to us, and they created shadow clocks that

marked the time by the shadow cast by an upright arm onto a horizontal arm,

and water clocks. In water clocks the passing of time was measured by water

dripping out of a hole at the bottom of a stone bowl.

They developed a way to live that included work and the fulfillment of

duties to the state and their religion. They were able to spend time at leisure and

in creative activities. All Egyptians enjoyed leisure. Peasants had less of it but

they still had time for dancing and singing, and sometimes a special meal. They

were all very fond of music and had professionals and amateurs (often women)

playing harps, lutes, flutes, oboes, and clarinets.

The early Egyptians are to some extent the same people as the Egyptians

of today. Those who now live beside the Nile are descended from those who

settled in farming villages there before history began. They are also descended

from the foreigners who for thousands of years have arrived and settled in their

country. Their many great achievements form a magnificent legacy from a gifted

people to us today, and all those that may come after us.

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