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Social Studies

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UNCOVERING THE SECRETS OF ANCIENT EGYPT



by Rena Korb

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE	4
Ancient Egypt	
CHAPTER TWO	9
Learning About the Past	
CHAPTER THREE	14
Farming and Animals	
CHAPTER FOUR	17
Dress and Appearance	
CHAPTER FIVE	20
Archaeology in Action	
Now Try This	22
Glossary	24

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CHAPTER ONE ANCIENT EGYPT

Thousands of years ago, a new civilization began in northeast Africa along the banks of the Nile River. The civilization became what is known as ancient Egypt. Before 2900 B.C., Egypt was divided into Upper and Lower Egypt. Around 2900 B.C. King Menes unified the two sections into one kingdom. He founded Egypt's first capital, Memphis. For almost three thousand years, pharaohs ruled the land and its people. The pharaoh was the most powerful person in Egypt. People even considered the pharaohs to be gods.



The ancient Egyptian civilization grew up around the Nile River.



King Khufu's pyramid in Giza was built about 2566 B.C. It is considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Known as the Great Pyramid, it stands more than 450 feet tall.



The ancient Egyptians created one of the world's first systems of writing, known as hieroglyphics. Today, we can read **remnants** of Egyptian poetry. We can see Egyptian structures. In countless ways, Egyptians influenced world cultures for centuries to come.

As part of their religious beliefs, Egyptians worshipped hundreds of gods and goddesses. They also believed that after death they would pass through a land beneath Earth and gain eternal life.

Some pharaohs were buried in enormous stone pyramids that were built near cities such as Giza and Sakkara. Work crews numbering in the thousands spent as many as twenty years building each of these grand pyramids. The laborers lived in towns near the pyramids as they worked.

People worked hard in ancient Egypt. Priests took care of the temples. In workshops, artisans created tools, spun and wove clothing, crafted jewelry, and shaped gold and copper.

Many more Egyptians worked in the fields. They grew crops such as palm fruits, figs, flax, and wheat. People also raised animals for food and caught fish. However, Egyptians also

valued free time. They enjoyed many recreational activities and hobbies.

Ancient Egyptians took great care in how they looked. They wore makeup, perfume, and fine clothing.

Ancient Egypt had many connections to other cultures. Egyptian merchants traded with places such as Greece and Nubia. People from other cultures also came to Egypt.





Archaeologists uncover buried artifacts to learn about ancient cultures.

Egyptology

By now you are probably asking a very good question: How do historians know so much about people who lived so long ago? To answer that question, we first need to know a bit more about a branch of archaeology called Egyptology, which began in the late 1700s. Egyptology is the study of ancient Egypt.

Archaeologists examine artifacts, the objects that people create, to learn about the past. Egyptian artifacts include buildings, tools, weapons, art, and written documents. Archaeologists also study the natural remains of living things, such as human and animal bones. Archaeologists **excavate** the places that they are studying. At these excavation sites, teams of skilled workers uncover the remains of civilizations that may have been buried for thousands of years.



Some of the most dramatic archaeological finds in Egypt include the town of Kahun and the tomb of King Tutankhamen. William Flinders Petrie excavated Kahun in the 1880s. At the time, it was the first pyramid workers' town ever to have been discovered. Kahun has shown archaeologists what life for ordinary Egyptians was like. Petrie found everyday objects as well as important documents such as essays about medical treatment.

In 1922 Howard Carter discovered the tomb of King Tutankhamen in the Valley of the Kings. It was a rare find because, even though the ancient Egyptians had tried to **secrete** the tombs of their royalty in the cliffs of the valley, thieves had broken into most of them and stolen the treasure that was buried with the pharaohs. Many archaeologists did not believe that a **pristine** pharaoh's tomb even existed. Carter's team spent ten years excavating this tomb. It provided a wealth of details about burial customs and the beliefs of the Egyptians.



Howard Carter found a tomb full of riches.





Egyptian Hieroglyphics

Before we can travel back through time to ancient Egypt, we need to learn more about hieroglyphics, the ancient Egyptian system of writing. Egyptians often covered their monuments with hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Archaeologists have also found hieroglyphics written on papyrus. Long ago, people in Egypt used papyrus the way we use paper. Unfortunately, the ability to read hieroglyphics was lost after the fall of ancient Egypt in about 332 B.C.

Then, in 1799, a French engineer working in Egypt found a large piece of black granite in the town of Rosetta. The same inscription appeared in three languages—Greek, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and a cursive form of hieroglyphics called Demotic. Because **linguists** could read the Greek text, they had their first real clue about the mysterious world of hieroglyphics. After many years of study, two men—Thomas Young of England and Jean-François Champollion of France—could read the hieroglyphics on the stone, now known as the Rosetta Stone.



Egyptians used hieroglyphics like these to read and write.



CHAPTER TWO LEARNING ABOUT THE PAST

Now that we know how archaeologists work, let's take a look at some discoveries about ancient Egypt.

The Line of Pharaohs

The first clue that archaeologists had about the pharaohs and their **dynasties** came through an Egyptian writer called Manetho, who recorded his works in Greek. In the third century B.C., Manetho wrote a history of ancient Egypt, but only fragments of it survived.

When archaeologists learned how to read hieroglyphics, they could understand the historical documents that the Egyptians had written in their own language. For example, lists of earlier rulers were inscribed in the burial chambers of some pharaohs. A document called the Turin Papyrus also had one of these lists. Egyptologists used these sources to determine the line of pharaohs and dynasties from the time of Menes to the fall of ancient Egypt. They now had a list of the pharaohs and when they reigned.



This is an example of a list of pharaohs that archaeologists decoded.





King Tutankhamen rides on a small boat.



The Afterlife

Egyptian burial chambers provide abundant sources of information about the ancient Egyptians' concept of an afterlife. The Book of the Dead, which is not really a book but numerous spells and hymns written on papyrus scrolls and tomb walls, showed the dead how to get to the underworld.

This text tells us that the Egyptians believed they needed to overcome obstacles, such as getting through a guarded door, to reach the underworld. The spells and hymns were written down to help the dead pass through to the afterlife. Items such as food, clothing, and jewelry were placed in each tomb for use in the afterlife. Some tombs even included games for entertainment and boats to help the dead travel to the afterlife, where they would spend eternity.



Building the Pyramids

According to the Turin Papyrus, Pharaoh Khufu reigned for twenty-three years. During this time, his people built the Great Pyramid for him. By studying the site of the pyramids, archaeologists have learned a great deal about the work done there.

Supervisors from thousands of years ago left their construction notes behind. Sometimes those notes were inscribed on the actual blocks of the pyramids. Other notes were inscribed on the supervisors' tombstones. From those sources we know that large crews, subdivided into many smaller groups, worked on the pyramids.

Each group had a formal name as well as a nickname. The workers often wrote their group names on the pyramid blocks. One crew named themselves after the pharaoh whose pyramid they built. They were the "Friends of Menkaure." Menkaure's pyramid sits beside that of Khufu, who was his grandfather.



Pharaoh Djoser was the first pharaoh to have a pyramid built in his honor. Consisting of six levels, it is now called the Step Pyramid.





The gold death mask of Tutankhamen



Three necklaces of gold and semiprecious stones crafted by artisans



The throne of King Tutankhamen



The Work of Craftspeople

Clues about the work of artisans are found all over Egypt. Archaeologists have dug up artifacts in ancient towns and found them in tombs. These objects show that artisans took enormous care with their work.

The range of objects that have been found by archaeologists seems endless. Jewelry, pottery, baskets, figurines, and furniture have been found at different sites all over Egypt.

Archaeologists also know something about how artisans worked. Pictures in tombs show workshops where artisans crafted items, such as cabinets and jewelry, and worked with metal. Supervisors inspected these objects once they were finished.

Many artisans in ancient Egypt worked with gold. The pharaohs and nobles often wore gold jewelry such as necklaces and bracelets. In their tombs, the pharaohs were surrounded with gold objects such as bowls, sculptures, and masks. King Tutankhamen was even buried in a gold coffin!

One extremely rare artifact confirms that Egyptians mined the gold they used. A map drawn in the twelfth century B.C. shows the routes to gold mines located in the eastern desert. Recent discoveries of ancient gold mines in southern Egypt have led to the possibility that Egyptians were the first people in the world to mine for the precious metal.





CHAPTER THREE FARMING AND ANIMALS



Peasants, who stood near the bottom of the social structure, worked in the fields.

Archaeologists know about the diet of the Egyptians from many sources. Dried foods, such as palm fruits, have been found in tombs. Archaeologists have even found pieces of bread that were baked more than three thousand years ago! A form of carving called a **relief**, as well as other pictures from tombs, show scenes of hunting, fishing, and feasting. Nobles clearly enjoyed **sumptuous** banquets of meat, poultry, fruit, cakes, and figs. Other scenes show farm workers harvesting wheat, grinding grain, and taking care of cattle and oxen. Archaeologists know that people grew a plant called flax because they have found its remains in many spots. They have also found items of clothing, ropes, and fishing nets made from flax.



Dried foods, such as fish, have been found in ancient tombs.



Leisure Time

Reliefs and artifacts show that the ancient Egyptian people enjoyed many activities in their free time. Children played with tops, dolls, slings, and wooden animals, and adults played strategy board games. Archaeologists have recovered wooden archery cases and fragments of writing that describe the pleasures of hunting. In artwork, we see women enjoying themselves by singing and playing the harp.

Even Egyptian poets talked about the need for free time and entertainment. One Egyptian writer reminded people to take time out for fun.

Do not shorten the time devoted to pleasure . . .

Do not lose time in daily work, once you have done what is necessary . . .

When your fortune is made, follow your desire,

For a fortune has no savor [taste] if one is gloomy.



An ancient Egyptian doll





A jar used to hold cosmetics



Egyptian women wore close-fitting dresses held up by shoulder straps.



Legend says that Queen Nefertiti was the most beautiful woman in Egypt.



CHAPTER FOUR DRESS AND APPEARANCE

Based on artwork, archaeologists know that Egyptian men generally wore short or calf-length kilts, or skirts. Women wore long dresses held up by shoulder straps. In a few cases, archaeologists have actually found clothing that Egyptians wore thousands of years ago.

We can also tell that Egyptians cared a great deal about the way they looked. Ancient Egyptians used many cosmetics that are quite similar to modern ones. Egyptian men almost always shaved their facial hair. They used several different types of razors. One looked a bit like a hatchet!

In pictures, the hairstyles of ancient Egyptians do not always look natural. Ancient Egyptians made wigs out of human hair. They also wove braids to attach to their own hair. Some women could not afford these wigs, so they used combs and pins to arrange their hair in the tight curls that were fashionable.

Women (and sometimes men) used eye makeup. In artwork, women can be seen wearing thick black eyeliner, green eye shadow, and rouge on their cheeks. They even had special brushes to apply these paints. Archaeologists have found remnants of many cosmetics, along with the jars used to hold them, at excavation sites. They have also unearthed laboratories where makeup formulas were still written on the walls!





Ties to Other Cultures

Texts and paintings describe the numerous expeditions that Egyptians took outside of the Nile Valley. One of Egypt's female rulers, Queen Hatshepsut, sent a voyage to Punt, a kingdom in eastern Africa. Artists told the story of this voyage in paintings on the walls of her **funerary** temple. Some of the fish and other animals in the pictures had never been seen in Egypt. Artwork also shows that foreigners visited and paid tribute to the pharaohs. Greeks, such as the historian Herodotus, visited ancient Egypt and recorded what they found there.

Evidence from the city of Kahun also proves that the Egyptians had contact with other lands. Archaeologists have found pottery from Crete and Cyprus, islands in the Mediterranean Sea. Either traders brought these pieces to Egypt or foreign visitors did.

Trees that were large enough to produce timber for building could not be found in Egypt. So Egypt had to trade with Lebanon for timber. Precious stones came from as far away as Afghanistan.

Artifacts even show that some workers originally came from Asia. Many people came to Egypt because it was such a rich and powerful kingdom.



The walls of Queen Hatshepsut's funerary temple show many voyages beyond Egypt. Artifacts made in other countries have been found in many places in Egypt.



CHAPTER FIVE ARCHAEOLOGY IN ACTION

In the late 1990s, a team of Egyptologists led by Mark Lehner and Zahi Hawass began to excavate a section of the pyramid town near the Great Pyramid at Giza. Based on the town's size, archaeologists believe that as many as 20,000 people may once have lived there. The pyramid village presents a challenge for archaeologists because they have found few written texts. Archaeologists only have artifacts and the remains left behind by the people who lived there thousands of years ago.

However, findings at the pyramid town at Giza are adding to our knowledge of ancient Egypt. One interesting discovery was a collection of three-foot-wide ramps made of dried mud lined up in a large structure. From this discovery archaeologists learned that ancient Egyptians often built their beds so that the foot rested a bit lower than the head, like a ramp. Lehner believes that his team uncovered a workers' dormitory. He thinks that as many as 2,000 workers—probably temporary ones—slept there. Chambers in the back of the structure may have been cooking areas.

Excavators found the bones of ducks, sheep, and pigs at the workers' village. They also recovered the bones of cattle, which means that people who lived there ate meat from imported cows.

Human remains also show that a doctor lived in the town. Some skeletons have broken bones that were treated and healed properly. Evidence even points to the likelihood that some people underwent brain surgery!



Life in Egypt has changed dramatically since the time of the pharaohs. Many generations have established their own cultures and built their own monuments. Many traces of the ancient Egyptian culture have disappeared.

Through the work of archaeologists, the secrets of the ancient Egyptian people are slowly being uncovered. As work continues, these scientists learn more about Egypt's culture. Every artifact they find, from shards of broken pottery to golden coffins, helps put together a picture of life along the Nile.



Dr. Zahi Hawass, a leading Egyptologist, sits in a cemetery found near a worker's village.





Now Try This

Archaeologists have described the ancient town of Kahun as a time capsule. That's because they have found so many everyday objects that Egyptians used, such as toys, games, kitchen bowls, and combs. From these artifacts, Petrie and other archaeologists drew many conclusions about the lives of the ancient Egyptians.

What would the things in your bedroom reveal to an archaeologist? Think about that question as you create your own time capsule.

Since the purpose of a time capsule is to help people in the future understand what your life is like right now, choose the objects carefully. In putting together your time capsule, choose items that follow two rules: They should represent your day-to-day life, and they should be understandable to archaeologists.

For instance, what if you put a portable video game in the time capsule but people in the future don't have batteries? Could an archaeologist figure out what it was? It might be helpful to include an illustration of a video game screen as well.



What do you see here? A group of things that you might find in your bedroom or a collection of artifacts?



Here's How to Do It!

Start by looking around your room. What do you see? More important, what do you think archaeologists thousands of years in the future would see?

To help you think about what is important to you and what will be meaningful to archaeologists, use a chart like the one below. Fill it in with at least ten objects that you find in your room, school locker, or home. Then go through the list and pick the five that you feel best represent the life you lead.

After you complete your list, you may want to share it with a friend or relative. Ask that person to tell you what he or she thinks about your selection.

Object	Practical Use	Possible Archaeological Conclusion
Baseball glove	I use it to catch baseballs when I play on my team.	Archaeologist probably will realize it was used to catch something.
My school newspaper	I use it to find out about events and issues at my school.	If archaeologists can read English, they will be able to learn about how schools function and what activities go on.



Glossary

dynasties *n.* successions of rulers who belong to the same family.

excavate *v.* to dig out.

funerary *adj.* of a funeral or burial.

linguists *n.* experts in languages.

pristine *adj.* as it was in its original state; untouched.

relief *n.* a type of sculpture where figures or designs project from a surface.

remnants *n.* fragments, small parts left.

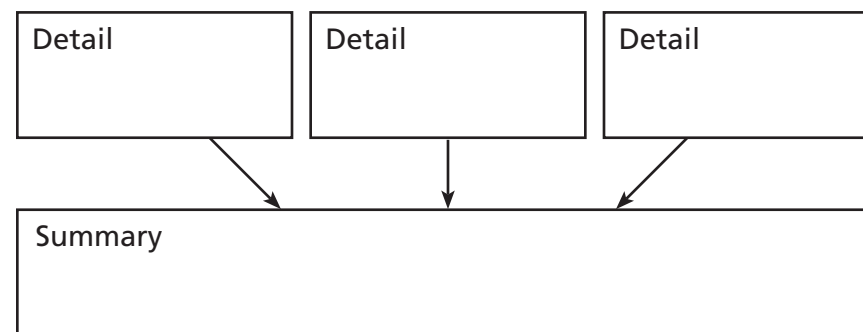
secrete *v.* to hide, to keep secret.

sumptuous *adj.* lavish and costly, rich.



Reader Response

1. Choose an ancient picture or artifact shown in this book and write a short paragraph explaining what it tells you about life in ancient Egypt.
2. Summarize how an archaeologist learns about past cultures. Use a graphic organizer like the one below to help you organize your ideas.



3. The words *relief* and *secrete* have more than one meaning. Use a dictionary to find these other meanings and use both words in sentences that illustrate these meanings.
4. If you found a pristine Egyptian tomb, would you open it or leave it alone? Explain your answer.

