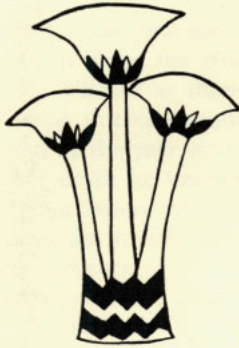


# Country Life in Ancient Egypt



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

COUNTRY LIFE IN  
ANCIENT EGYPT



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Picture Book

NO. 2

PREPARED BY DR. WILLIAM STEVENSON SMITH,  
CURATOR OF EGYPTIAN ART IN THE MUSEUM

*Cover Design: Harvesting grain in the Fifth Dynasty tomb chapel of Sekhem-ka  
(G 1029) at Giza; from an unpublished drawing of Norman de Garis Davies*

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# Country Life in Ancient Egypt

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Egypt has rightly been called the gift of the Nile. In a country of little rain, the regular annual inundation of the river has produced a rich soil that made agriculture the source of the nation's prosperity. Although great cities grew up in the narrow desert-bordered valley, the Egyptian nevertheless felt himself close to the soil. The country is like no other land. Nearly always within view is the sharp contrast between the green fields and the tawny desert hills that hem in the cultivation on each side. Between summer and late autumn a sheet of water from the river-flood lay across the fields. Out of this rose the villages as though they were islands. The peasant used one word interchangeably for either field or marsh, since only for a part of the year would this be dry land. In thinking of the world after death he imagined a similar 'Field of Reeds' and 'Field of Offerings' where islands rose from a heavenly inundation for the repose of the transfigured dead.

In a mild climate, the resurgence of plant life after the regularly recurring Nile floods encouraged belief in a stable universe and the renewal of life after death. All living things were maintained by the powers of the Sun God Ra from the bright sky above, while other manifestations of nature were personified in the gods which brought order to the universe. Characteristics admired or feared in the animal world were thought to be divine manifestations, — the swift power of the bright-feathered falcon moving through the heavens, the deadly poison of the cobra, the fierceness of the lion or the strength of the bull. This partly accounts for the fascinating portrayal of animals and plant life in Egyptian art. Perhaps more than anything else, the charmingly expressed belief in the beneficence of the sun fostered that love of nature which is the delight of Egyptian sculpture and painting.

In very early times the Nile Valley did not present the promise of an easy existence for the Prehistoric Egyptian. He was faced with impenetrable papyrus thickets and formidable animals such as the crocodile, hippopotamus and elephant. The swampy jungle had to be cleared by the first settlers and the river-floods mastered by dikes and canals. Even after this irrigation system became estab-

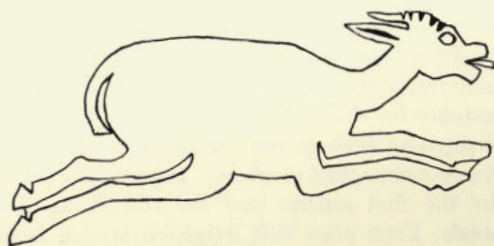
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lished, the outlying swampy areas remained a fixed part of Egyptian life. Through the marshes were ferried the cattle to their grazing grounds and, here, the sportsmen caught birds in clap-nets and with the throwing stick, fished and hunted the hippopotamus. The rocky desert hills supplied other game for the hunter.

The control of the river by dikes and canals freed large tracts of land for the cultivation of grain and flax and the growing of fruit trees and vegetables in the gardens of the country houses and small villages. The great estates were self-contained, maintaining in addition to the agricultural laborers, the workshops of various crafts to supply the needs of the establishment.

An amazing record of this life in the country has survived, due to the fact that the Egyptian believed that he would continue in the Afterworld in much the same manner as he had done on earth. Thus his daily life was pictured on the walls of his tomb or models of characteristic activities were buried with him along with his personal possessions that they might become magically efficacious. The same instinct led to the creation of life-like stone statues of the owner of the tomb, his family and his servants.

Our very representative collection of these fine products of the ancient craftsmen, therefore, evokes a revealing picture of a vital and creative people. We are fortunate in that the greater part of the collection comes from the excavations of the Museum's Expedition, maintained for over forty years, and can thus be closely related to the historical background. The following group of pictures has been selected to convey something of the charm and intimate human side of Egyptian country life as well as the artistic achievement of a great civilization.







1. ALABASTER THRONE OF KING MYCERINUS: Dyn. IV. 09.202

This heraldic design, combining the symbols for the United Kingdom, contrasts with the Map of the Afterworld in our last picture where the king will rule in his divine form as Horus. Nile Gods tie together the plants of Upper and Lower Egypt beneath the serpent goddess Buto who represents the North. The king's names, protected by the Horus falcons under the sky emblem, identify this statue which stood in his funerary temple at the Third Pyramid of Giza about 2600 B.C.

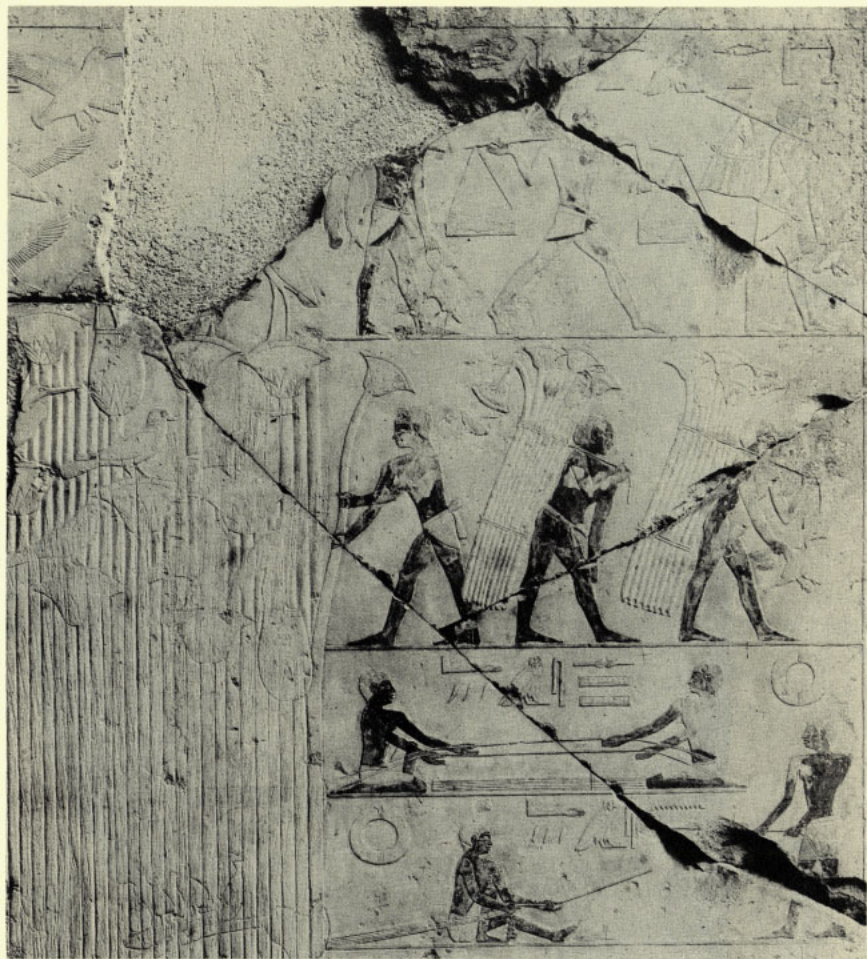


2. FRAGMENT OF LIMESTONE THRONE OF KING AY:

Dyn. XVIII. 50.3789

The Nile God tying the papyrus of Lower Egypt about the emblem for the joining of the two lands maintains the same symbols 1250 years after Mycerinus. The style, though, is now one of flowing curved lines and a softer treatment of the forms, characteristics that lingered on at Thebes after the collapse of Akhenaten's brief religious revolution.

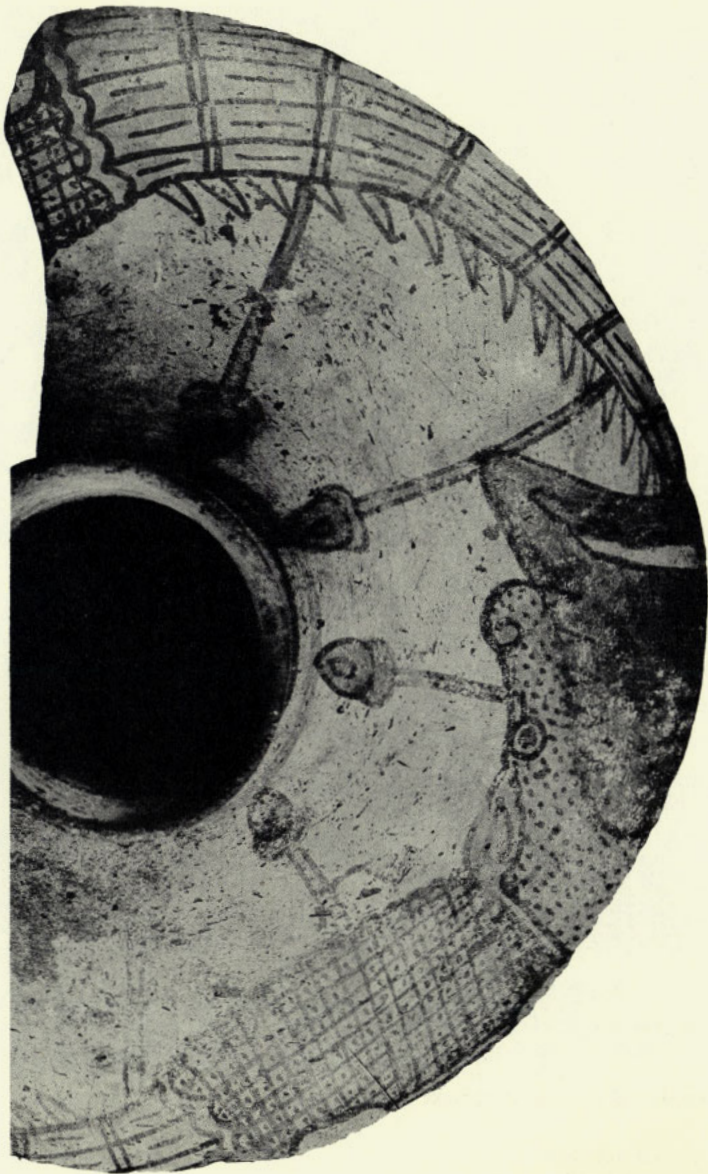




3. RELIEF FROM KA-EM-NOFRET'S CHAPEL: Dyn. V. 04.1761

The papyrus thickets provided good places for hunting and fishing as well as the raw materials for paper, ropes and matting. In this Saqqarah tomb, about 2500 B.C., men carry home from the swamps their catch of fish and birds. Others cut bundles of papyrus and make mats and rope.





4. PAINTED MEROITIC JAR FROM KERMA. 13.4035

Feared in Egypt from Predynastic Times, the crocodile was to be found more frequently in the region of the cataracts, and to the south where Kerma lay, by the time this pot was made in the Second or Third Century A.D. One monster's body curves around the upper part of the jar while another is engaged in swallowing an unfortunate native of the Sudan.



5. DETAIL OF IVORY BOX INLAYS (partly in the Khartum Museum and partly in Boston): Dyn. XXV.



6. ELEPHANTS ENGRAVED ON A BRONZE MEROITIC VESSEL.

The ostrich and elephant were rarely represented in Egypt itself, although found south of its border. The delicately carved bird beside a date palm shows how thoroughly the Kushites had absorbed the Egyptian style by the Eighth Century B.C. when this ivory was placed in the tomb of King Shabako at El Kurru in the Sudan. The later elephants are drawn in the clumsy but vigorous manner of the painted Meroitic crocodile opposite, with which they are contemporary.



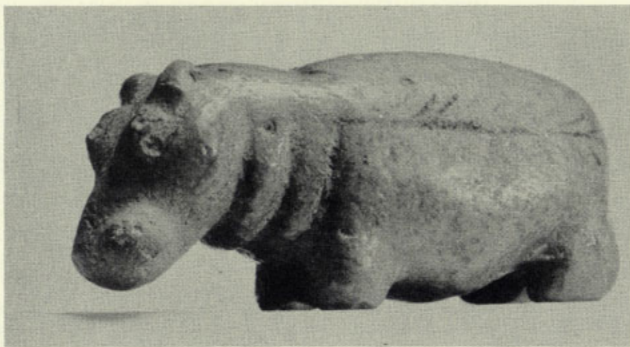
7. FAIENCE JAR FRAGMENT FROM KERMA: Dyn. XII. 20.1235



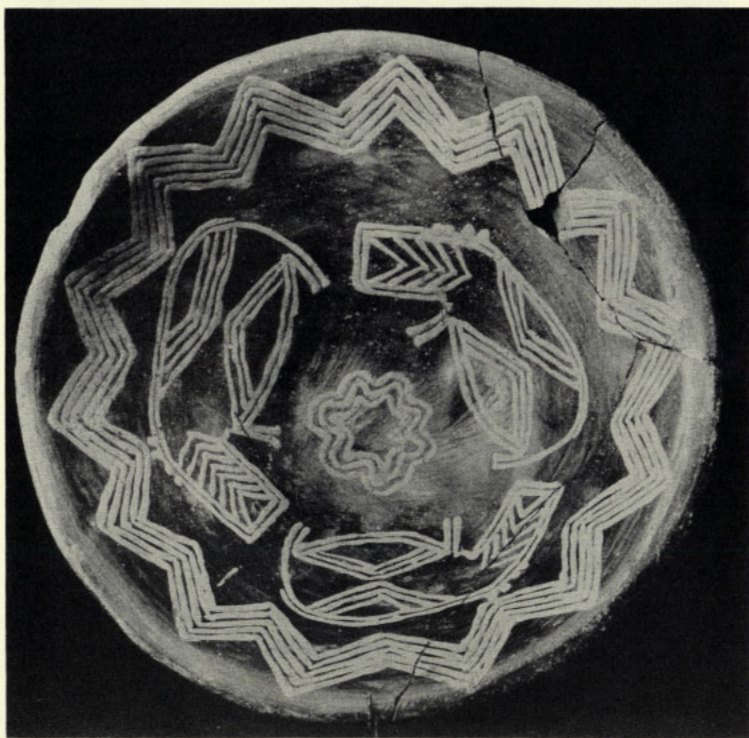
8. RELIEF FROM KA-EM-NOFRET'S CHAPEL: Dyn. V. 04.1761

The Egyptian artist observed the bird life in swamps, field and orchard. Above, he has sketched fluttering birds on a vessel found in the fortified trading post that was maintained in the Sudan at Kerma between 1980 and 1700 B.C. Below, one can recognize herons, ibis, pigeons, cormorants, a kingfisher, hoopoe and lap-wing, as well as a butterfly and a grasshopper, in the careful drawings of the Old Kingdom artist, about 2500 B.C.





9. FAIENCE HIPPOPOTAMUS FROM KERMA: Dyn. XII. 13.4121



10. PAINTED EARLY PREDYNASTIC BOWL FROM MESAEEED.

11.312

The early Egyptian has caught something of the menace of the formidable hippopotamus in his simple drawings at about 4000 B.C. Some two thousand years later the Middle Kingdom craftsman has affectionately given a more benign aspect to this small figure.





11. LIMESTONE RELIEF FROM GIZA: Dyn. IV. 34.59

Prince Ka-wab, the eldest son of Cheops, the builder of the Great Pyramid, is shown returning from a day's fowling, about 2630 B.C. With him are cages of ducks which have been caught with the aid of a decoy heron which stands on top of the cages.

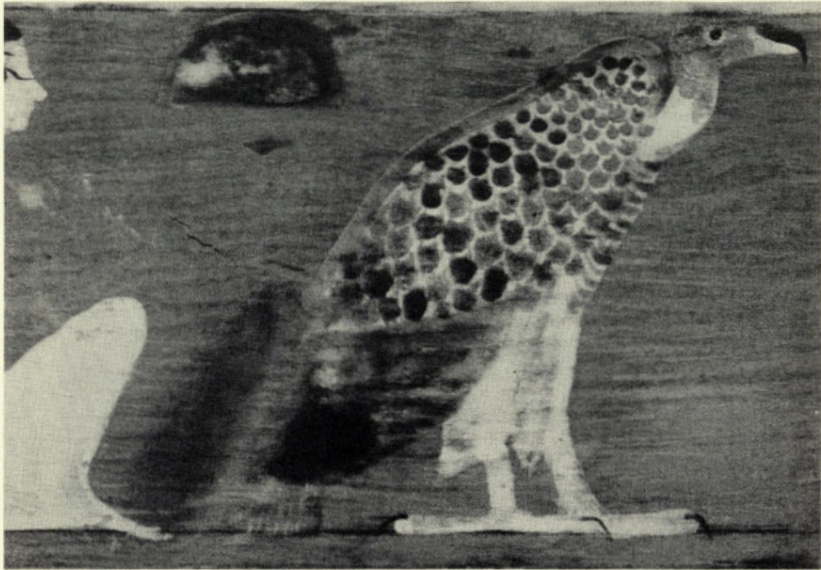


12. LIMESTONE RELIEF FRAGMENT OF THE LATE PERIOD.

40.619

With a calf and vessels containing provisions, these girls are boating in the marshes as in early times. However, at about 400 B.C., the modelling of their bodies begins to show a contrast with the flat treatment and simple outlines of the Old Kingdom relief opposite. This probably resulted from contact with the Greeks and their new sense of depth and volume in natural forms.





13. PAINTED HIEROGLYPHS ON COFFIN LID OF DJEHUTY-NEKHT: Dyn. XII (about 1870 B.C.). 20.1826



14. DETAIL OF BED CANOPY OF QUEEN HETEP-HERES (copy of Cairo Museum original): Dyn. IV (about 2650 B.C.). 38.873



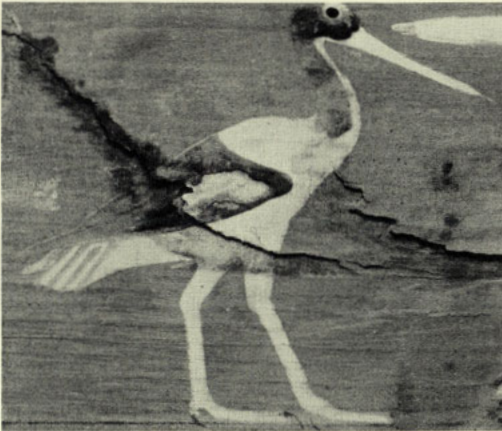
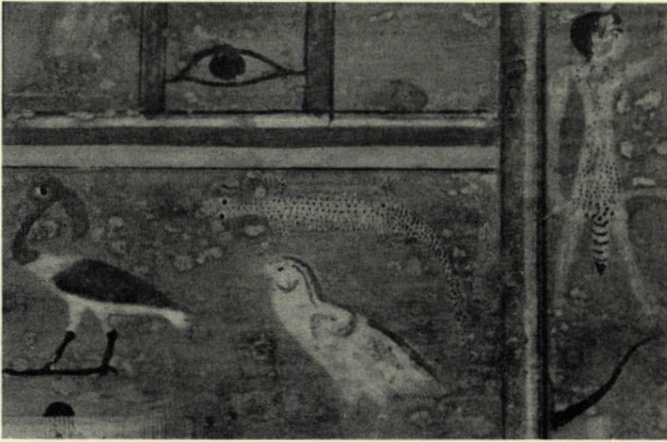
15. SMALL CLOISONNÉ IBIS: New Kingdom (1570-1085 B.C.)  
04.1748



16. QUAIL IN A BOX: limestone royal relief: Dyn. XII.  
(about 1950 B.C.). 54.647

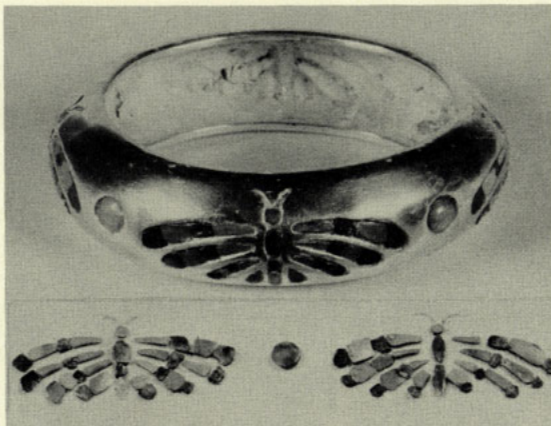
The sensitivity of the craftsman to his medium appears in the painted vulture, opposite, where the brush strokes produce a different impression from the hard, meticulous engraving of the Old Kingdom goldsmith. More formal is the treatment of the enamel and gold ibis, while bold, simple surfaces are used by the sculptors who carved the magnificent decorations of the pyramid temple of Sesostris I, excavated by the Metropolitan Museum at Lisht.





17-19. DETAILS OF THE BERSHEH COFFIN OF DJEHUTY-  
NEKHT: 20.1822 Dyn. XII (about 1870 B.C.). 20.1826

The painter of the Bersheh coffin has portrayed with extreme delicacy a lizard, a serpent, a crested ibis, young quail, an owl and a stork.



20. REPRODUCTION OF A SILVER BRACELET OF QUEEN HETEP-HERES and some of the original inlays of carnelian, turquoise and lapis-lazuli: Dyn. IV (about 2650 B.C.). 47.1699



21. HIEROGLYPHS ON HETEP-HERES' BED CANOPY: Dyn. IV.  
38.873

The butterflies are more formal in design than the hornet with its careful observation of the attachment of wings and legs. Skilled craftsmen served the mother of the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza at a period of culmination in the arts.



22. 04.1761



23. 54.644



24. 04.1760

The viper, owl and rabbit are hieroglyphs from an inscription in the Dyn. V chapel of Ka-em-nofret from Saqqarah, about 2500 B.C. The giraffe's head comes from the pyramid temple of Sesostriis I at Lisht, about 1950 B.C., excavated by the Metropolitan Museum. Ptah-sekhem-ankh's retainers are returning from the hunt with a stag, hyenas and a hare, about 2500 B.C., in his chapel from Saqqarah.





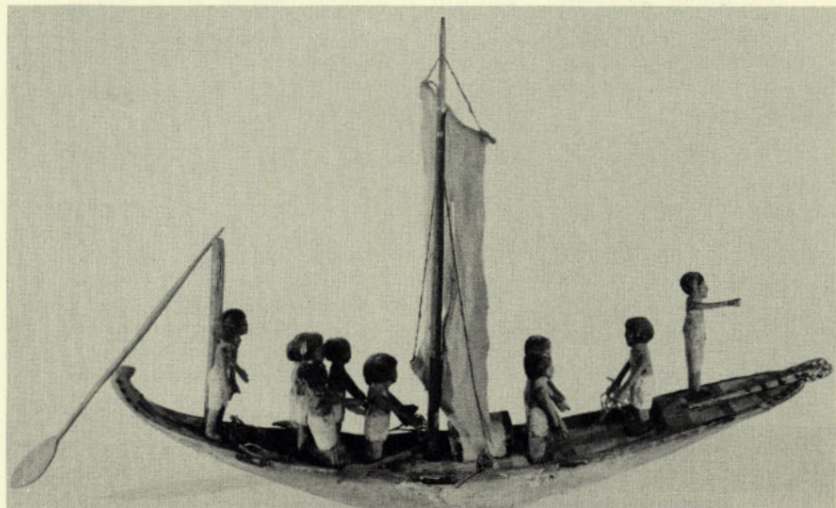
25. LIONS AND HOUNDS ATTACKING A CALF AND ANTELOPE  
on a Dyn. XVIII wooden toilet box (about 1400 B.C.). 49.493



26. IVORY BED INLAYS FROM KERMA: Dyn. XII (about 1850 B.C.):  
Crested crane (20.1323), running gazelle (20.1377), eagle (13.4204),  
giraffes (20.1344, 1544), paired goats (20.1374), ibex (13.4219),  
hyena (13.4221), and ostrich (20.1332).

Hunting in the desert rivalled the pursuits in the marshes as a sport. The movement of the animals becomes more agitated in the drawing of the New Kingdom, but note how the Kerma gazelle already raises its legs in a gallop nearly five hundred years earlier.





27. WOODEN MODEL OF A SAILING BOAT MANNED FOR TRAVEL ON THE RIVER: Dyn. XII (about 1870 B.C.). 19.162

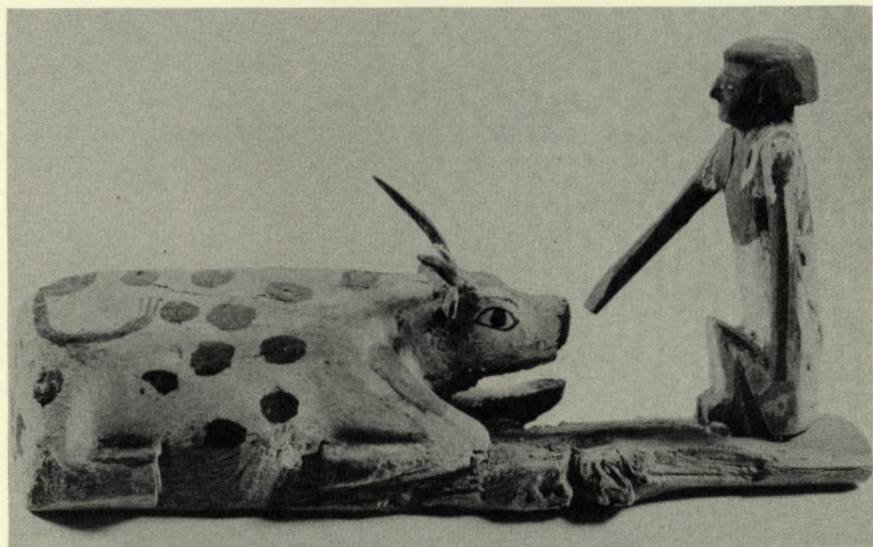


28. DETAIL OF A SAQQARAH STELA: FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD (about 2200 B.C.). 24.594

In a period of poverty and political chaos, the artist has abbreviated the earlier scenes to a few essential figures in a small space: a man forcibly feeding a goose, a woman with supplies and a calf, and a man bringing back lotus flowers and papyrus from the marshes.



29. MAN PLOWING WITH A YOKE OF OXEN: wooden model  
from Bersheh: Dyn. XII. 21.408



30. MAN FEEDING AN OX: WOODEN MODEL FROM BERSHEH:  
Dyn. XII (about 1870 B.C.). 21.819





31. SAQQARAH RELIEF OF PTAH-SEKHEM-ANKH: Dyn. V  
(about 2500 B.C.). 04.1760

A typical agricultural scene on an Old Kingdom estate shows men plowing with oxen, men cutting grain and driving loaded donkeys to the threshing floor.





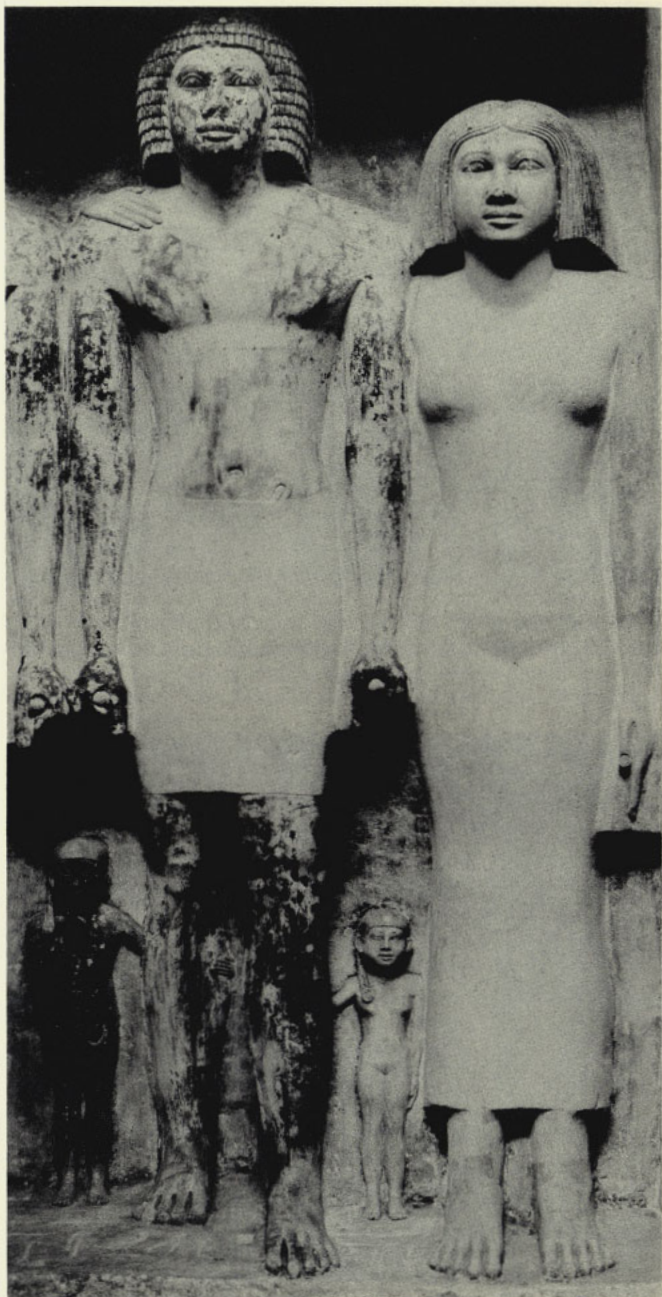
32. RELIEF OF PTAH-SEKHEM-ANKH: Dyn. V (about 2500 B.C.).  
04.1760

Harvesters forking a pile of grain beside the threshing floor; note the baby donkey.



33. THE PRODUCE OF THE FIELDS AND MARSH. Detail of the painted Bersheh coffin of Djehuty-nekht: Dyn. XII (about 1870 B.C.).  
20.1822





34. AN OLD KINGDOM FAMILY OF THE LAND-OWNING CLASS.  
Detail of a statue of Pen-meru with his wife and children from Giza:  
Dyn. V (about 2550 B.C.). 12.1484





35. LIMESTONE STATUETTE OF AN OLD KINGDOM WOMAN GRINDING GRAIN: Dyn. V (about 2500 B.C.). 21.2601



36. SERVANTS ON AN ESTATE MAKING BREAD: wooden model from Assiut: Dyn. XI (about 2050 B.C.). 04.1782



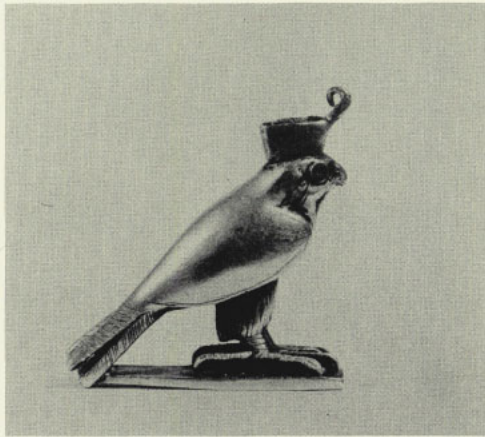
37. POTTERY HOUSE MODEL FROM RIFEH: Dyn. XII (about 1870 B.C.). 07.550

These pottery models were actually used as trays for food offerings at the tomb but represent such a house as might have stood on a country estate. Beyond the pond in the courtyard, the house is entered by doors at the back of the colonnade. Two of the rooms had barrel vaults suggesting that the building was of brick with wooden columns. The railed space on the roof was probably where the family slept on hot nights.



38. WOODEN MODEL OF BRICK-MAKERS FROM BERSHEH: Dyn. XII. 24.411

The worked mud was pressed into molds and laid out to dry in the sun.



39. 27.853



40. 38.873

The hawk form of the God Horus is seen here as a gold amulet, probably of Dyn. XII. The bird is in flight on the gold covered bed canopy of the Dyn. IV Queen Hetep-heres. The king was called the 'Living Horus' during his reign and became one with the god after his death.





41. 39.746

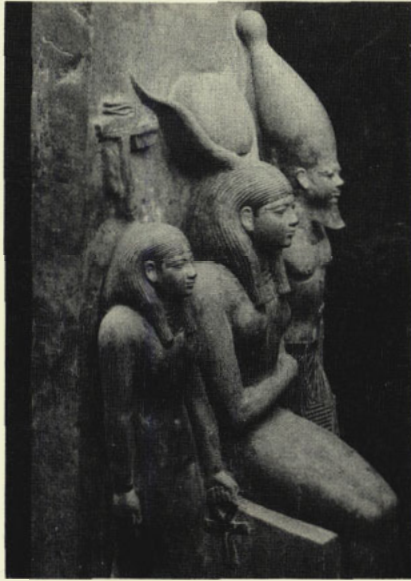


42. 04.1761



43. 07.532

Of the nature deities, Horus and the Sun God Ra were intimately related. The falcon wings of Horus frame the earliest sun disk on the end of the Dyn. IV curtain box of Hetep-heres, about 2650 B.C. and appear under the sky emblem on the relief from the Deir el Bahari funerary temple of the Dyn. XI King Menthu-hotep about 2050 B.C. When Ra is shown in the name of the Dyn. V Sun Temple of King Weserkaf, in the Ka-em-nofret chapel about 2500 B.C., his name is determined by a hawk on a standard. Note how the sun rests on top of the obelisk-shaped construction which imitates the Ben-ben stone in Ra's sanctuary at Heliopolis. The association of the two gods is usually expressed: Ra-Horus-on-his-horizon (Ra-Horakhte).

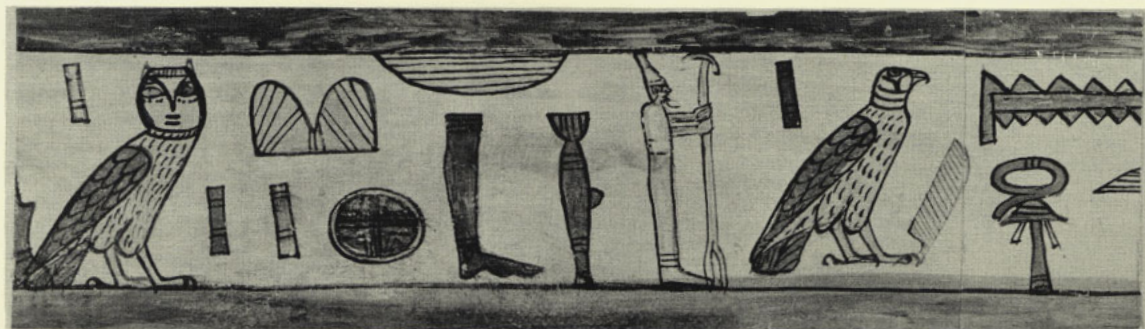


44. MYCERINUS SLATE TRIAD: Dyn. IV (about 2600 B.C.). 09.200



45. NEW KINGDOM STELA FROM GIZA (about 1300 B.C.). 34.50

The cow-horned goddess Hathor was the patroness of the royal family in Dyn. IV. Above, she protects Mycerinus, the builder of the Third Giza Pyramid. Beside her is the personification of the Hare Nome, the province in which lies Bersheh. Below, Hathor appears from her sycamore tree to present cool water and refreshment to a worshipping family, thirteen hundred years later than the Pyramid Age.



46. DETAILS OF THE PAINTED WOODEN COFFIN OF MEN-KAB:

First Intermediate Period (about 2150 B.C.). 03.1631

Spelled out in the delightfully clumsy hieroglyphs of a period of decline in the arts are the epithets of Osiris as Lord of Busiris in the Delta and Abydos in Upper Egypt. A god of vegetation who was once a king on earth and resurrected after death, Osiris is shown seated with a royal crown and flail, and standing in mummy form as ruler of the dead.





47. SIDE OF INNER COFFIN OF DJEHUTY-NEKHT FROM BERSHEH:  
Dyn. XII (about 1870 B.C.). 21.962

This rare diagrammatic rendering of the Afterworld forms a pendant to our first picture which summed up the Egyptian's earthly kingdom. It illustrates the Book of the Two Ways, showing an upper route by water and a lower land road leading past obstacles which the dead must avoid to reach the pleasant Fields of Reeds and of Offerings. It is based on the country the Egyptian knew, with islands rising from the inundation. Here, however, there are lakes of fire and places guarded by fearful demons. From this were developed characteristic passages in the New Kingdom Book of the Dead. Mingled in the representation are beliefs concerning the regions in the sky of the Sun God Ra and the Kingdom of Osiris in the Underworld.