

Death is Not the End: Ancient Egyptian Religion and Art

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that we have gone back thousands of years. Imagine a land with pyramids hundreds of feet high and a river that floods every year, the birth of an agricultural society. Imagine tens of thousands of people, wearing nothing but loincloths, lugging limestone after limestone through the desert. We are in ancient Egypt, a place with a unique and fascinating culture, unlike anything we have ever experienced in the United States.

We often hear about the discoveries of mummies on the news, or see the inclusion of ancient Egyptian artifacts and temples in adventure movies, but what is the real story behind it all? Why did ancient Egyptians spend their entire lives preparing for the afterlife? What were their religious beliefs and thoughts on the afterlife? What did they believe happened to humans once they died? Why were Pharaohs considered to be so powerful and how were they prepared for their life after death? Through an evaluation of ancient Egyptian culture, religion, and art, this paper will discuss the ancient Egyptians' beliefs in the afterlife, and some of the manners in which Pharaohs were prepared for their life after death. We will also observe how the culture's art reflects and responds to its fundamental beliefs.

RELIGION AND AFTERLIFE

The ancient Egyptians had an extremely religious culture and were strong believers in the afterlife; they wanted to ensure that their experience was peaceful and happy. As Taylor says in his book Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt, the Egyptians believed that the universe consisted of three types of beings: the gods, the living, and the dead (15). They lived in a polytheistic society, meaning that instead of worshipping just one god, such as Christians or

Muslims do, they worshipped many different gods and goddesses. These entities were very important to Egyptians because, as Casson states in his book Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt, “every detail of [an individual’s] own life, [...] whether the annual inundation of the Nile [...] or the chance death of his cat, was a specific, calculated act of god” (84). In other words, the gods were spiritual beings that determined humans’ fates, and everything happened because they willed it. When something bad happened, for instance, humans could blame the gods, and when something good happened, they could thank them. The gods each had their own special characteristics and played a specific role in Egyptian society. The goddess Hathor, for example, was responsible for love and childbirth (similar to the Greek Aphrodite) (Taylor 85). She was depicted with a human body and a head with cow horns. The god Khnum, on the other hand, was linked to creation; he was a man with a ram’s head “often portrayed as a divine potter modeling men on a potter’s wheel” (Taylor 86).

Not only did the ancient Egyptians believe in many gods and goddesses, they also had a very interesting view on death. While some of us may understand the death of our bodies as being the termination of our selves, the Egyptians believed that death was not equal to an end, but a change into a different kind of existence (Taylor 12). They “conceived of [death] as something to be enjoyed” and refused to “see in it an end to the stuff of life” (Casson 119; Andreu 148). Put simply, rather than dreading death and seeing it as an end, Egyptians accepted it as a continuation into another form of existence. They believed that life was a temporary stage, merely a transitional period into an eternal and more fulfilling afterlife (“Concept of the Afterlife”). Since life was only transitional and the afterlife was eternal, it was very important for Egyptians to, during their time on earth, “[prepare] the body and soul for a peaceful life after

death” (“Religion”). By preparing their body and soul, the ancient Egyptians ensured that their eternal afterlife was a pleasant one.

THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF A HUMAN

To better understand the ancient Egyptians’ beliefs in the afterlife and why they took such great care in preparing their body and soul for the afterlife, we must first examine the different parts that they believed humans to be consisted of. There are many religions, such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity which believe that humans are composed of two parts: the body and the soul. The ancient Egyptians, however, believed there were more to humans than these two elements. They “perceived man as a composite of physical and non-physical elements” and thought that humans consisted of six entities (Taylor 16). The body was the physical part, and the shadow, the name, the spirit (*ka*), the personality (*ba*), and immortality (*akh*) were considered the non-physical parts.

In Taylor’s account of the name, he explains that it was an important aspect of someone’s individuality (23). The name in ancient Egypt was the same as it is now: a word we use to call someone. Since names set people apart from one another, they are individualistic. Taylor explains that the creation and preservation of a human’s name was crucial because it was one of the things that made their survival after death possible: “Since the name was so closely linked with the prosperity of the bearer, survival of death was linked to the remembrance of the name” (23). In other words, the deceased could continue to live as long as their name was remembered. Given that a person’s name was so important, it was placed on statues and in the coffins of mummies in order for an individual to be recognized once dead. During offerings to the deceased, the name had to be uttered so that the *ka* knew where to receive its nourishment (“The Concept of the Soul” para 15).

For ancient Egyptians, the *ba*, the shadow, and the *akh* were also important parts of what it meant to be human. The *ba* can be described simply as an individual's personality. It was believed that the *ba* could "leave the body temporarily by way of dreams and visions" (Casson 118). It could travel between the world of the living and the world of the dead, but if it did not return to the body regularly, every night, for instance, then it would not survive ("Treatment of the Dead" para 3). Even upon death of the body, the movement of the *ba* continued. Like the *ba*, the shadow could separate from the body and move around freely (Taylor 24). Since each person casts a different shadow and no two are alike, the shadow makes a human unique. The *akh* is described as a person's immortality and, unlike the other elements, it was "not joined at birth" (Coons 2). Instead, it was "created after death through the use of spells and text read at the funeral" (Coons 2). So, where the name, shadow, *ka*, and *ba* were with a human from the time of their birth, the *akh* only resulted upon an individual's death.

According to Taylor, the "most important of the non-physical aspects of man was the *ka*" (18). In their book Gardner's Art Through the Ages, Kleiner and Mamiya explain that the *ka* was believed to be created at the moment of birth by the ancient Egyptian deity Khnum and is hieroglyphically symbolized by upraised human arms (45) (see Figure 1). The *ka* can also be described as the life force behind humans. Egyptians believed that once the body died, the *ka* could continue to live forever, as long as it had a place to inhabit (Kleiner and Mamiya 45). Since a body begins to disintegrate upon death, Egyptians had to find ways to preserve the human body so as to maintain a home for the *ka*. Embalming techniques emerged to preserve the body and *ka* statues were created in case something should happen to the mummified body, as we will discuss later.



**Figure 1: The
hieroglyphic**

PHARAOHS

Of all the individuals in ancient Egypt, the Pharaohs' parts of the body held the most importance, as Pharaohs were a very significant aspect of the culture's religion, art, and politics. For hundreds of years now, the United States has been living under the government of a democracy, in which the president is elected by the public. In ancient Egypt, however, they lived in a monarchy, which was common for those times. In a monarchy, one individual holds the supreme power; in the case of Egypt, the ruler was called a Pharaoh. The word "Pharaoh" is a Greek word for the ancient Egyptian "Great House," since it referred to the king and his palace rather than just the king himself ("Pharaoh").

Pharaohs were the divine rulers of a united ancient Egypt. In her book Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids, Andreu says that "by divine right, the monarch governed [...] Upper and Lower Egypt united under his authority" (1). They were believed to be men who were both religious and political leaders, as well as gods (Casson 87). By virtue of their divinity, Pharaohs were the communicators between the humans and their gods. Their divinity also gave them much power and their role was to impose order and prevent chaos on earth (Egyptology); consequently, the "death of a king was a disaster befalling the land" (Andreu 14). When a Pharaoh died, he was believed to be joining the other gods (Casson 87). Furthermore, unlike the elections we have in the United States, where the president is chosen by the people, Pharaohs came to power through divine right; in other words, the son of a Pharaoh replaced his father as ruler. The public

therefore had no say in who became their leader, but this did not appear to be a problem since it was accepted that the rulers were chosen by the gods themselves.

MUMMIFICATION: PRESERVING THE BODY

One of the ways that Pharaohs—and later less powerful or affluent individuals as well—were prepared for the afterlife upon death was through a process called mummification. Mummification emerged in the Fourth Dynasty BCE as a way of preserving the deceased's body. With a preserved body, some of the non-physical elements of an individual could have a place to reside: "If the spiritual and physical elements of the individuals were to be reunited after death, it was necessary to preserve the integrity of their fleshly container and avoid its decay at any cost" (Andreu 145). Performed by embalmers, mummification was a gruesome yet remarkable procedure.

As Greek historian Herodotus explains in a passage about mummification, before the embalmer could begin the removal of the deceased's organs, the people who brought him the body had to say what grade of mummification they wanted to use (Casson 122). There were three grades: there was the finest grade, which was clearly the best and most expensive, there was the second grade, which was cheaper, and then there was the third grade, which was the simplest and cheapest. The embalmer and those who brought the body also had to come to an agreement on a price to be paid (Casson 122). Since Pharaohs were divine and powerful beings, they were undoubtedly always treated with the finest grade of embalming, which consisted of a long and bloody process.

After many excavations and much research, scholars have been able to uncover the process of mummification. To begin with, no matter what grade was used, the heart of the deceased was left in place because it was considered to be very important. It was regarded as the

core of intelligence and necessary for survival, as well as “the center of the individual, both anatomically and emotionally” (Taylor 17). Perhaps contrary to what might be presently believed, the brain did not appear to have any special significance to the Egyptians; it was extracted through the nostrils with the use of an iron instrument and simply discarded. Next, an incision was made in the flank through which the lungs, liver, stomach, and intestines were extracted. The reason these organs were removed was because they were seen as being able to decay easily. They were wrapped individually and placed in what were called canopic jars. Canopic jars were made out of wood or stone and were typically in sets of four, one for each of the four organs (see figure 2). Canopic jars were important because they were seen as a “magical protection for the organs” and were placed in the tomb with the deceased. (Casson 122; Kleiner and Mamiya 45; “Treatment of the Dead”)



Figure 2- Canopic jars in which the organs of the deceased are placed to be protected.

(“Treatment of the Dead”)

The hole in the abdominal cavity was then filled with resin-soaked linens and sewn up. After sewing up the body, it was put in a naturally occurring salt compound, called natron. Natron was used to dry the bodies’ tissues and thus dehydrate it. In Herodotus’ account of mummification, the soaking of the body in natron was a procedure that took seventy days, but according to Kleiner and Mamiya, it only took forty days. In Casson’s view, the number of days was a “matter of religious belief,” so it could very well have been forty, seventy, or a number of days somewhere in between these two figures (123). In any case, when the dehydration of the

body was complete, the embalmer washed the corpse and then applied lotions to it. With the body now clean, the embalmer could finally wrap it up with bandages made of fine linens. Since Egyptians did not have glue, they wrapped the bandages in gum instead, which worked just as well. Unfortunately, not everyone could afford the most expensive grade of mummification. For the lower class or for those who simply wanted to minimize expenses, one of the other two grades of mummification was used. In these lesser grades, there was no removal of the organs, making the process simpler and quicker. (Casson 123; Kleiner and Mamiya 45)

As demonstrated with their use of mummification, the Egyptians' view of death and the afterlife was at the same time a unique and serious aspect of their culture. For ancient Egyptians, ensuring a proper preparation for the afterlife was extremely important, and the fact that they performed mummification shows the lengths they would go to for something they believed in so strongly. It is hard to imagine anyone doing such a procedure in our present day society; a simple burial or cremation of the body appears to be commonplace. This shows that, although death is a hard and painful moment for all of us, the afterlife is not generally recognized in our culture. While present-day dealings with the body, particularly in the United States, reflect our culture's disregard or disinterest in a life after death, the process of mummification in ancient Egypt reflects a contrary belief that the afterlife was most important.

ART AND KA STATUES

In addition to mummification, art was crucial to preparing for the afterlife in ancient Egyptian civilization. However, art was not perceived in the same manner as it is today. While in our society we see art as something creative or aesthetically pleasing to the eye, the art of the Egyptians was deeply integrated into their religion and beliefs: "Egypt's glorious artistic creations were inspired by religion and religion alone" (Casson 84). As discussed in Ancient

Egypt, “Egyptian artisans produced some of the most spectacular art ever made, yet their culture had no word for art and no concept of art for art’s sake” (Silverman 212). In other words, we call their statues and paintings art, but the Egyptians were not even producing these works for an audience to view—their art was purely for religious and functional purposes. Andreu says that a “statue was intended to follow its subject into the afterlife as its exact double” (63); statues were not created to be looked at, but they were made to replace the body of a person once they died. For a while, it was only Pharaohs who could afford to have statues and paintings created for their tombs, but as time progressed, people from lower classes were able to afford these creations as well.

Sculptors in ancient Egypt were respected and highly valued. They were described in great ways, such as a “fashioner of life” and a “modeler of forms” (Andreu 63). Sculptors were vital in ancient Egyptian society due to the fact that “a statue erected in tomb or temple was a way of ensuring an individual’s existence for eternity after death” (Casson 84). Without them, the statues which were so crucial to Egypt’s religion and to their preparation for the afterlife would not have existed. If there were no sculptors to make statues, where would the *ka* reside? There was always mummification, but for the Egyptians, that was not assuring enough. In case mummification failed and the Pharaoh’s body was destroyed, there needed to be a backup abode for the *ka*. Statues with the Pharaohs’ images were therefore created, called *ka* statues. The manner in which the *ka* statues were fashioned greatly reflected the work’s purpose to last eternally.

Let’s examine, for example, the seated statue of Khafre (see Figure 3-a). Khafre was an Egyptian Pharaoh from the Fourth Dynasty, who ruled from about 2520 to 2494 BC. He was a very powerful and important figure, so the preservation of his *ka* was imperative. There are many

ways in which Khafre's ka statue echoes its function to ensure that the *ka* last eternally. First of all, the figure is depicted frontally with "an impassive gaze fixed straight ahead of [him], and [his] hands resting flat on [his] legs" (Andreu 63). This rigid frontality and expressionless face was typical in ancient Egyptian statues. Also, it was not vital for sculptors to create the statue as an actual portrait of the Pharaoh, but it was important for them to produce an "idealized likeness of their subjects" (Silverman 212). This was probably due to the fact that the statues were not being created as artworks to show a viewer what the Pharaoh looked like, but were meant more as a general representation of the figure to house the *ka*. It is most likely that Khafre did not have such a youthful, proportional body, especially not at the time of his death. However, this beautiful depiction of the Pharaoh's body emphasizes the divinity of the figure (Kleiner and Mamiya 51). An image of a young, perfect man is undoubtedly more divine than that of a man in his old age with a less-than-perfect body.

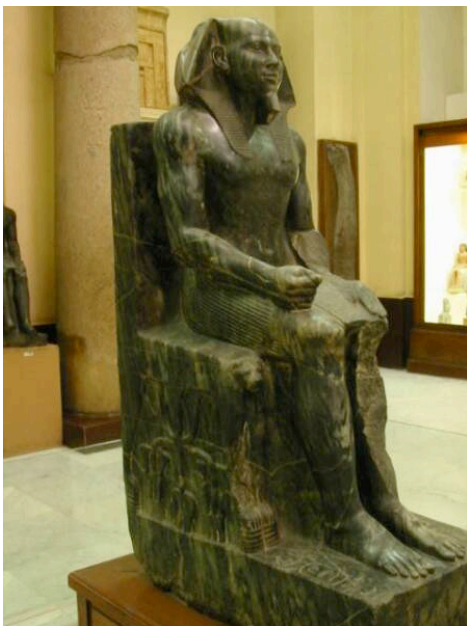


Figure 3-a: Khafre, from Gizeh, Egypt, Dynasty IV, ca 2520-2494 BCE. Diorite, approx. 5'6" high. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

(Kleiner and Mamiya 51)

The material used and the compactness of the figures were also critical components of ka statues. The use of harder stones, such as diorite, granite, and basalt, were needed to ensure that the statue fulfilled its eternal purpose (Kleiner and Mamiya 51). Softer stones, such as limestone and sandstone, were presumably used for individuals of lower classes. In Khafre's case, since he was an almighty Pharaoh and always received the best, his statue was created using diorite, one of the hardest and most durable stones. The statue was also shaped in a very compact manner, with minimal negative space and few breakable parts; in other words, the sculpture is boxlike and the limbs are connected to the rest of the body. The combination of strong stone and compactness are crucial stylistic elements to creating an eternal statue. Having the limbs attached to the body with strong stone makes it less likely for the body parts to break off and thus less likely for the statue to get destroyed over time (Kleiner and Mamiya 51).

It was also important for ka statues to radiate serenity and to have symbols representing the Pharaoh's divinity. The depiction of peace in the statue shows the tranquility the Pharaoh will experience in his afterlife (Kleiner and Mamiya 51). Moreover, the fact that there is no movement in the statue, with Khafre's resting limbs and emotionless face staring directly ahead, furthers its eternal purpose (Kleiner and Mamiya 51); if the statue is not moving, it cannot be associated with a specific moment, making it timeless. Furthermore, the inclusion of symbols on ka statues was prevalent. In the case of Khafre's statue, there are intertwined lotus and papyrus plants on the side of the throne. These plants symbolize the unified Egypt under which Pharaohs ruled. Behind Khafre's head is a falcon extending its wings around the Pharaoh's head (see Figure 3-b), which represents the falcon-god Horus forever protecting and sheltering Khafre his afterlife (Kleiner and Mamiya 51). Finally, Khafre wears an imperial false beard and a royal headdress, or *nemis*, both of which are symbols of his royalty and power.



**Figure 3-b: Khafre (detail),
from Gizeh, Egypt, Dynasty
IV, ca 2520-2494 BCE.
Diorite, approx. 5'6" high.
Egyptian Museum, Cairo.**

("Giza Complex")

Many of the same stylistic elements are employed in the creation of ka statues with more than one figure. In a group, such as a married couple, the figures can be represented as either sitting or standing (Kleiner and Mamiya 52). In the ka statue of King Menkaure and his wife Queen Khamerernebtly II, they are standing (see Figure 4). Often there is no sign of affection between the two figures. However, the arm of the wife is regularly placed around the waist of her husband, and her other hand is positioned on his arm; this is a sign of their marital status (Kleiner and Mamiya 51; Silverman 216). Just as seen in the seated statues, the standing figures were also depicted rigidly frontal, with their fists clenched and their arms straight down. Menkaure and his wife were also fashioned using very little negative space and, although it was not as durable as diorite, using a hard stone called greywacke. As with most ka statues during this time and as with the seated ka statue of Khafre, the combination of elements, including hard stone, compactness of the figures, and rigidity, came together to create a statue that would essentially last forever.



**Figure 4: Menkaure and
Khamerernebtly, from Gizeh,
Egypt, Dynasty IV, ca. 2490-2472
BCE. Graywacke., approx. 4'6"**

(Kleiner and Mamiya 52)

CONCLUSION

The Egypt we know today is significantly different from the Egypt we have been slowly discovering through excavations of sites formed thousands of years ago. In present-day Egypt, mummies and pyramids are no longer created. Most Egyptians do not believe in the same gods of the past and worship instead the Muslim god Allah. Also, presidents have replaced the divine kingship of the Pharaohs. If so many fundamental aspects of their society are different today, then why try to appreciate the ancient Egyptian past? Well, despite all the differences that have evolved throughout time, ancient Egypt's beliefs are fascinating and distinct. Its art, although deeply ingrained in its religion and functional purposes, can be appreciated both for its beauty and as a token for understanding their culture. Every society has its own values and beliefs which are reflected in different ways. For ancient Egyptians, the afterlife was central and embedded in their society. This led to their fascinating use of mummification, and their creation of beautiful statues meant to house the *ka*, or life force, of humans.

Ancient Egypt had an impact on other ancient societies and has even had an influence on present-day societies. During the Archaic period of ancient Greece, for instance, the sculptures that were created were primarily modeled after ancient Egyptian statues. This is intriguing because, although they also lived in a polytheistic society, the Greeks did not have the same approach to the afterlife; their sculptures were not created to house the elements of a human. For the Greeks, art was principally created for art's sake. Like all ancient civilizations, Egypt has also contributed to the development of modern society. Its religion, for instance, has influenced many subsequent religions. Egyptian pyramids have both affected architecture (i.e. The Louvre

in Paris) and furthered the development of mathematical skills. Ancient Egyptians, with their mummification and abilities in dissection, have also had an influence on the medical world. So, although the Egyptians lived thousands of years ago, they continue to influence us even today. It is therefore important to understand the different aspects, such as religion and art, which make up this distinct and complex society.

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