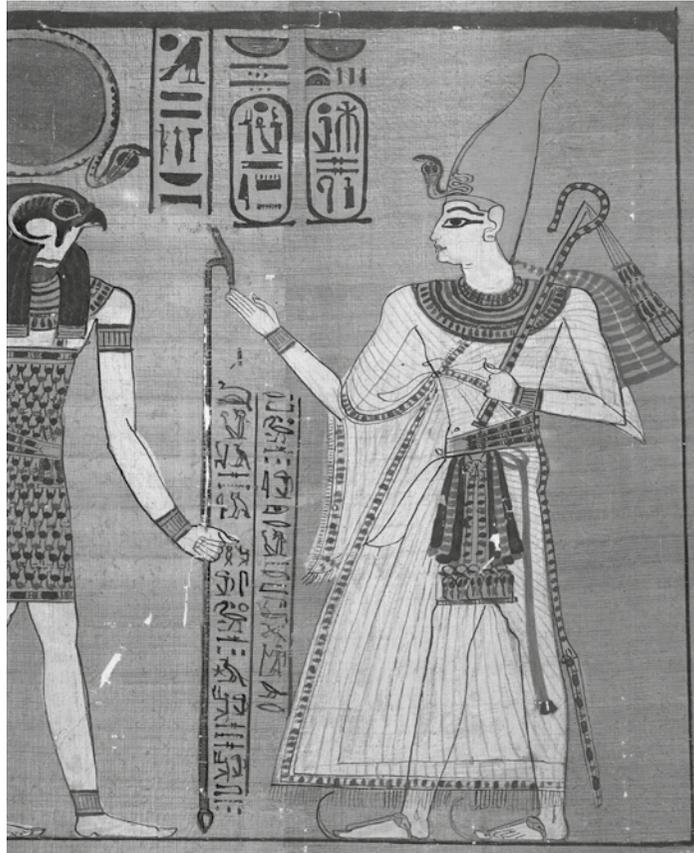


**LIVES OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS**



# LIVES OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS

Toby Wilkinson

*With 18 illustrations*

 **Thames & Hudson**

For Emma

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Frontispiece: Vignette from the Great Harris Papyrus: Ramesses III (no. 78) stands before Ra-Horakhty. British Museum, London

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2007 by  
Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181a High Holborn, London, WC1V 7QX

This paperback edition 2019

*Lives of the Ancient Egyptians* © 2007 and 2019  
Thames & Hudson Ltd, London  
Text by Toby Wilkinson

Typeset by Mark Bracey

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-500-29480-2

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI (UK) Ltd

To find out about all our publications,  
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## INTRODUCTION

What was it really like to live in ancient Egypt? Our impression of pharaonic civilization is dominated by its visible remains, by pyramids, temples and tombs: but what of the people who commissioned and built them, who staffed the offices of central and provincial government, who served in the temples, who fought to defend Egypt's borders, who toiled in its fields? What of the men and women of the Nile Valley who created and sustained its spectacular culture? Individual perspectives on ancient Egypt are rarely encountered in the literature, with the exception of a few well-known pharaohs, such as Hatshepsut or Amenhotep III, Ramesses II or Cleopatra. Yet rulers lived lives heavily circumscribed by ideology and ritual and, for this reason, they are often rather less interesting witnesses than their subjects. It is surprising, therefore, that so little has been written about the ordinary people who actually experienced Egyptian civilization at first hand. For it is only by sharing their viewpoint that we can begin to appreciate the variety and complexity of life under the pharaohs. That is the simple aim of this book: to explore the history and culture of ancient Egypt through the lives of its inhabitants, to give them their own voice.

In selecting our hundred subjects, the aim has been to strike a balance – chronological, geographical and social. The limits of the available evidence have not always made this an easy task. Take the chronological scope of ancient Egyptian civilization: 3,000 years separated the birth of the Egyptian state from its absorption into the Roman empire. Put another way, the era of the Great Pyramid was more remote from Cleopatra's time than she is from our own. If a single generation approximates to thirty years, then ancient Egypt – as an independent and vibrant culture – spanned one hundred generations. Hence, with one hundred lives, this book should be able to cover every phase of pharaonic history in equal detail. Unfortunately, the vagaries of archaeological preservation do not permit so even-handed an approach. More is known about a single thirty-year span in the fourteenth century BC (the so-called Amarna Period) than about

## PART 1

# Foundations

## EARLY DYNASTIC PERIOD

Around 3000 BC, the first nation-state in history was born – in Egypt. In the Nile Valley and Delta (known to the Egyptians themselves as the Two Lands), the various rival kingdoms and territories which had developed over a period of a thousand years were unified into a single country ruled over by a single king who claimed divine authority. This process, known as the unification, seems to have occurred fairly quickly, taking a few generations at most to complete. Although the precise course of events remains a little hazy, the outcome is clear: the kings of This (ancient Tjeni, near modern Girga), one of two or three proto-kingdoms in Upper Egypt (the southern Nile Valley), emerged supreme. They overcame not only their rivals in the south of the country, but also the rulers of towns and cities throughout the marshlands of the Delta. The king known to us as Narmer (no. 1) is the first monarch who can be said with confidence to have ruled over the whole of Egypt, from the First Cataract in the south to the shores of the Mediterranean in the north. He was recognized by his near-contemporaries as a founder figure, and has a special place in Egyptian history as the first king of the 1st Dynasty.

The challenge for Narmer and his immediate successors (nos 2–4) was to develop and prescribe the means for ruling their new, geographically vast realm. Egypt was certainly not lacking in cultural dynamism: two distinctive and vibrant traditions had grown up, in the Nile Valley and Delta, respectively, during the millennium or more preceding the unification. Technologically superior and more in tune with the conspicuous consumption favoured by Egypt's early ruling class, Upper Egyptian culture had supplanted its northern

counterpart in the Delta during the late predynastic period, mirroring the process of political unification that was likewise driven from the south. The kings of the 1st Dynasty took this cultural tradition, and refined and codified it as an expression of the court's own power. Art and architecture were carefully deployed to enhance the prestige of the monarchy as an institution, allowing it to overcome challenges such as the regency under Merneith (no. 2) or all-out civil war in the early years of Khasekhemwy's reign (no. 4). The barrage of propaganda worked spectacularly well: kingship swiftly became the ideological glue that bound Egypt together; government without monarchy was unthinkable. One of the great achievements of Egypt's early rulers was thus to develop an iconography and ideology of royal rule that survived, virtually unchanged, for the next 3,000 years.

Relatively little is known about the early kings as individuals, since hieroglyphic writing was still at an early stage of its development and, in any case, monarchy thrived best behind a veil of secrecy and mystery. But the political, economic and religious programmes of these rulers can be deduced from scraps of textual and archaeological evidence. The first three or four centuries following unification – known as the Early Dynastic Period – were a time of great innovation and of rapid developments in Egyptian civilization, when all the major building blocks of pharaonic culture were put in place. Some of the techniques used to extend and maintain the state's power would be familiar to us today. While expounding a creed of strident nationalism to bolster its own legitimacy, the government quietly increased formal contacts with foreign lands, using the revenue from trade to fund increasingly elaborate royal projects (notably the king's tomb). Internally, the state tightened its grip on all areas of administration, in particular ensuring that every aspect of the national economy was subject to state regulation, if not direct control. The inauguration of a regular census of the country's wealth combined with meticulous record-keeping set the pattern for Egypt's enduring love-affair with bureaucracy.

The two interlinked policies – of economic and political centralization, and an obsession with monumental architecture – came

together in the reign of Djoser (no. 5) with the construction of the first Egyptian pyramid. The enormous feat of engineering required to erect a mountain of stone high on the Saqqara plateau was matched by the logistical operation needed to quarry and transport the blocks, and recruit, house, feed and direct the massive workforce. The sheer administrative complexity of pyramid-building necessitated a more professional bureaucracy, rather than the small cabal of royal relatives with shifting areas of responsibility which seems to have characterized government in the first two dynasties. Men like Hesira (no. 6) and Metjen (no. 8) show the changing nature of high office in the 3rd Dynasty. The titles lovingly recorded on their funerary monuments allow us a glimpse of individual careers, for the first time. The most famous official of Djoser's inner circle, Imhotep (no. 7), achieved even greater prominence and was venerated as a god of learning and wisdom by later generations of Egyptians. His great creation, the Step Pyramid complex, dominates the 3rd Dynasty, and marks it out as a transitional era, when the achievements of Egypt's formative period were consolidated and the scene set for future glories.

## 1 NARMER EGYPT'S FIRST KING

Who is the first ancient Egyptian known to us by name? The origins of hieroglyphic writing have now been pushed back, beyond the beginning of the 1st Dynasty, into an era when Egypt was still a collection of competing kingdoms, not yet unified into a single nation-state. There are combinations of signs from this early period which may be names, but we cannot be sure, and in any case they are difficult to read. The rulers of Egypt's predynastic period must, for the moment, remain anonymous. The first king whose 'name' is readable, and consistently written on objects ranging from simple sherds of pottery to a decorated stone macehead, belongs at the very start of the dynastic sequence. His most famous artifact, a ceremonial palette from the temple at Hierakonpolis (ancient Nekhen, modern Kom el-Ahmar), stands in the entrance hall of the Egyptian Museum

in Cairo, welcoming visitors at the start of their tour through 3,000 years of pharaonic culture (fig. 1). It has become an icon of the foundation of a great civilization; the king for whom it was made is recognized as the first in Egyptian history.

His name is Narmer – except that the reading ‘Narmer’ is almost certainly wrong. The two signs used to write the name, a catfish and a chisel, did indeed have the respective phonetic values ‘nar’ and ‘mer’ in later phases of hieroglyphic writing, but there are compelling reasons to think that they represented different sounds in this early period. Indeed, the ‘name’ Narmer may not be a name at all, rather, a combination of symbols associating the king with the fierce forces of nature (catfish) and their striking power (chisel). As such, it would belong within the dominant mode of expression found in prehistoric royal iconography. This explanation of Narmer’s name would support his identification as a transitional figure, whose reign spanned the predynastic past and the dynastic future, and whose lasting achievement was to recast the ideology and iconography of royal power into new, lasting forms that would endure for the next three millennia.

What do we know about Narmer the man? He became king around 3000 BC and was almost certainly from the Upper Egyptian city of This; this was one of the early centres of Egyptian civilization and the capital of a kingdom which, by the closing years of the predynastic period, encompassed the northern part of Upper Egypt, most of Middle Egypt and parts of the Delta. Whether by diplomacy or force, Narmer extended his rule over the whole of Egypt, from the First Cataract to the fringes of the Delta. A key step in this process of territorial consolidation may have been Narmer’s marriage to a woman named Neithhotep. Judging from the location of her tomb, she was descended from the old royal family of Nagada (ancient Nubt), one of This’s rival centres in Upper Egypt which it may have conquered some years earlier. A strategic alliance between these two royal families would have been a good basis for building a wider political consensus. In this same vein, Narmer took pains to venerate the shrine of Horus at Hierakonpolis, the third major centre of Upper Egyptian power. Horus was not only the city’s local god, but was also

the god of kingship. So paying homage to his cult served the dual purpose of reinforcing Narmer’s royal credentials while satisfying the elite of Hierakonpolis that their new ruler, if not a local man, intended to respect their traditions.

The two most impressive objects donated by Narmer to the temple of Horus were consummate examples of royal iconography, and powerful statements about the extent of royal power. The ceremonial macehead showed the king, enthroned beneath a canopy, watching a parade of prisoners and tribute, and observing rituals associated with the two localities – Buto (ancient Djebaut) in the northwestern Delta and Hierakonpolis itself in southern Upper Egypt – that symbolized the geographical extremes of his new realm. The decorated palette carried scenes of a similarly symbolic nature: the king smiting a bound captive, inspecting ranks of slain and decapitated enemies, tearing down the walls of a rebel stronghold. Whether the enemy was intended to represent a Delta chieftain or a foreign tribesman, the message was the same and crystal clear: as king of all Egypt, Narmer would brook no opposition. He would defend Egypt’s borders, but the quid pro quo was the unswerving loyalty of the entire populace. This uncompromising message was reinforced at Egypt’s southern frontier by the construction of a massive fortress on the island of Elephantine (ancient Abu) which both guarded the river approach from Nubia and towered over the local community. The authoritarian character of divine kingship had already been firmly established.

The xenophobia of state propaganda – on a cylinder seal from Hierakonpolis, Narmer is shown beating a group of Libyans, while an ivory fragment from his tomb shows a bearded Asiatic stooping in homage to the king – masked a more pragmatic attitude to foreign relations. The discovery of Egyptian pottery from the reign of Narmer at sites throughout the northern Delta and southern Palestine suggests active trade between the two regions. The royal court went to great lengths to obtain the valuable commodities it required to maintain its economic and political dominance. A series of inscriptions carved on an isolated rock outcrop in the heart of Egypt’s eastern desert bear witness to an expedition sent by Narmer to this remote region, probably in search of gold or high-quality stone.

Objects bearing Narmer's name have been found at sites the length and breadth of Egypt, indicating a king whose authority was recognized over a greater area than any of his predecessors. Modern scholars have debated whether he or his immediate successor, Aha, should be accorded the position at the head of the 1st Dynasty. For the kings who came after them, there was no such debate. The necropolis seals of both Den (no. 3) and Qaa, from the middle and end of the 1st Dynasty respectively, put Narmer first in the list of Egypt's rulers. To them, Narmer was the undoubted founder figure. Five thousand years later, it seems churlish to disagree.



## 2 MERNEITH THE FIRST WOMAN TO HOLD THE REINS OF POWER

The king was a unique figure in ancient Egypt. Ideologically, he was above the rest of humanity and was considered the earthly incarnation of the celestial god Horus. Politically, he was head of state and government; he ruled by decree, and all departments of government were answerable to him. Without a king, Egypt – in both ideological and political terms – would founder. This created a problem when, as happened on occasions, a new monarch came to the throne as a child. Although religious tenets could accommodate a minor as a channel between human and divine spheres, the business of government needed direction by an adult individual. The solution was a regency. In practical terms, it was dangerous to entrust such power to one of the young king's male relatives, since such a figure might then go one step further and usurp the throne. It was far safer to appoint as regent the person who could have no such ambitions and who, in any case, symbolized the transition between the old and new reigns: the king's mother.

The earliest attested regency in Egypt took place in the middle of the 1st Dynasty. The old king, Djet, had died, leaving the throne to his successor Den (no. 3). Since the new monarch was still a child,

his mother Merneith governed in his place. She was the wife and mother of a king and may also have been a king's daughter, born to the third ruler of the dynasty, Djer. Merneith's period of office is the first certain instance of a woman holding the reins of power in Egypt. Of course, all official documents bore the name of the reigning king, despite his minority, so she is only sparsely attested by name: on three vessel fragments and a small ivory vessel from the Saqqara region. However, as *de facto* ruler of Egypt, Merneith was granted the privilege of a full mortuary complex in the ancestral royal burial-ground at Abydos (ancient Abdu). Her tomb was marked on the surface in the traditional manner, with a pair of large funerary stelae bearing the owner's name in raised relief.

This architectural acknowledgment of Merneith's regency seems to have been a decision taken personally by her son, Den, when he reached adulthood. His name features prominently on objects from Merneith's burial and his recently discovered necropolis seal lists 'the king's mother Merneith' alongside the previous rulers of the 1st Dynasty, starting with Narmer (no. 1). By contrast, the seal of Qaa, the last king of the dynasty, omits Merneith, indicating that, after her son's reign, she was no longer accorded equal status with the *de jure* rulers of the period. But during her regency and for the remainder of her life as king's mother, Merneith and Den clearly developed a strong bond. The son repaid his mother's loyalty and support in the most suitable manner, with a tomb fit for a king.



## 3 DEN REFORMING RULER OF THE 1ST DYNASTY

Den is the best-attested king of the 1st Dynasty. Even taking into account his accession as a child, he enjoyed a lengthy reign: a recently discovered fragment of a limestone vessel from the southwest annex of his tomb mentions 'the second occasion of the *sed*(-festival)'; the *sed*-festival was the royal jubilee, usually celebrated after thirty years

of a reign and thereafter at more frequent intervals. Of course, a long tenure as king is not noteworthy in itself; but Den's time on the throne was a period of exceptional innovation, of major cultural and material developments in almost every sphere, that helped Egypt take a further, decisive step on the path from nascent state to great civilization.

He declared his reforming agenda from the outset, starting with the royal titulary. Kings had previously been designated as being the incarnations of Horus and ruling under the protection of the Two Ladies, the patron goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt. To these two established titles, Den added a third, *nesut-bity*, literally 'he of the reed and bee'. Best translated as Dual King, it signified the many dualities over which the monarch presided – divine and human, sacred and secular, Nile Valley and Delta, floodplain and desert, east and west – emphasizing that the harmony of opposites inherent in created order depended upon the person of the king for its continuation. This elaboration of the ideology of kingship was further reflected in the adoption of a new crown combining the white headdress of Upper Egypt and the red of Lower Egypt. Den signalled that he was going to be a king of both, of all.

Looking beyond the borders of Egypt, Den also inaugurated a new policy with regard to neighbouring lands. One of his secondary names, Zemti, means 'of the desert', and he seems to have taken a special interest in Egypt's arid, northeastern frontier zone. There is evidence from his reign for military activity in southern Palestine (whether actual or ritual) and trade expeditions using the coastal route from the Delta. The fruits of such sustained contact can be seen in the large number of Syro-Palestinian vessels – presumably containing valuable oils and unguents – imported into Egypt during Den's reign.

An intensification of foreign activity was matched by administrative reforms at home. An apparent increase in the number of high officials at Den's court may reflect changes in the structure of government. Tighter royal control over the affairs of state required not just able administrators but also an accurate assessment of the country's population and resources. Den saw to this as well: an entry from the middle of his reign, in the royal annals compiled in the late Old Kingdom (the so-called Palermo Stone), records a 'census of all the

people of the north, west and east'. To be of use, all this information had to be recorded and archived. It may be no coincidence that the earliest roll of papyrus from Egypt was found among the grave goods of Den's Chancellor, Hemaka.

The end result of all this effort – increasing foreign trade, streamlining government, and improving the management of the economy – was the ability to devote greater resources to promoting kingship by fulfilling the sovereign's traditional duties. Hence, the Palermo Stone records Den's foundation of a new temple called 'thrones of the gods', while the king also engaged in other religious activities such as visiting important shrines, dedicating new cult images, and promoting rituals such as the running of the Apis bull. An overflowing royal treasury also allowed Den to commission new, more impressive royal monuments. At Abydos, his architects built a magnificent royal tomb with an important innovation: an entrance stairway giving access to the burial chamber. This greatly facilitated the provisioning of the tomb, and was swiftly adopted throughout Egypt. As for Den's funerary equipment, his craftsmen surpassed themselves. Stone vessels in a bewildering variety of forms – from imitation reed baskets to flowers – were a particularly fashionable product of the royal workshops. Under Den, Egyptian civilization reached a new level of sophistication.



## 4 KHASEKHEMWY HARBINGER OF THE PYRAMID AGE

The 2nd Dynasty is one of the most obscure periods of ancient Egyptian history. Not only are its monuments fewer, and less well known, than those of the preceding or succeeding dynasties, its kings are also mostly shadowy figures, barely attested in the written or archaeological records. A notable exception is the last king of the 2nd Dynasty, whose reign marked a crucial turning-point in the development of Egyptian civilization.

At the beginning of his reign, the king adopted the Horus-name Khasekhem, 'the power has appeared'; it was a prophetic statement, since he would be the most influential monarch for a century or more. He showed a particular interest in the city of Hierakonpolis, one of the early centres of the Egyptian monarchy, and in its local temple, dedicated to Horus, the god of kingship. Here, Khasekhem donated a range of votive offerings, including vessels of travertine and granite and two seated statues of himself, one in limestone and the other in siltstone. All these objects bore inscriptions, not merely naming their royal donor, but also making reference to military action against a northern foe. Each of the vessels is decorated with a representation of the vulture-goddess Nekhbet, protector-deity of Upper Egypt, standing on a ring containing the word 'rebel'; an accompanying text describes the scene as 'the year of fighting the northern enemy'. In a similar vein, the bases of Khasekhem's statues carry inscriptions which show defeated enemies in contorted positions, labelled as 'northern enemies 47,209'. Although these allusions to military action against Lower Egypt could represent a ritual act, it seems more likely that they refer to an actual historical event: a civil war with the north in which Khasekhem fought to regain control over the whole country.

Khasekhem's battle for supremacy was not confined to confrontation with a northern enemy. A fragmentary stela from Hierakonpolis shows a defeated Nubian enemy, part of a scene of triumph labelled 'humbling the foreign land'. It seems that the king had to contend with rivals to his throne from two directions. The struggle with Lower Egypt was eventually resolved in Khasekhem's favour, and he marked his victory by changing his name to the dual form Khasekhemwy, 'the two powers have appeared'; it was consciously modelled on the name of the 2nd Dynasty's founder, Hetepsekhemwy, and thus announced a programme of national renewal. Khasekhemwy reinforced the message by adding to his name the epithet 'the two lords are at peace in him'. It was a clear indication that the troubles of the early part of his reign were over. The country could now look forward to renewed peace and prosperity.

One of the immediate consequences of a return to domestic stability was an upsurge in Egypt's international contacts. Trading

links resumed with Byblos on the Lebanese coast, presumably to procure supplies of cedar-wood for ship-building. Sea-going craft allowed Egypt to engage in trade with its Mediterranean neighbours, and also to increase its political influence in the region. A stone block from the temple at Hierakonpolis, listing foreign countries, probably recorded tribute or enemies slain in battle; while a seal-impression preserves the earliest occurrence of the title 'Overseer of Foreign Lands'. Both suggest that Egypt under Khasekhemwy began a policy of conquering and annexing territory beyond its borders.

The increased revenue entering the royal treasury funded an upsurge in state construction projects. Khasekhemwy became a major patron of temple-building in Upper Egypt, at sites from Elkab (ancient Nekheh) to Gebelein (ancient Inerty). At Hierakonpolis, in addition to extending the temple, he commissioned an enormous cult enclosure (now known as the Fort) to be built near the town. It was constructed from mudbrick, with walls several metres thick, and was decorated around the entrance gateway with reliefs in pink granite showing the king taking part in royal rituals. Highly visible from the surrounding area, the building acted as a focus for the celebration of the royal cult.

In a break with recent practice, Khasekhemwy decided to opt for the traditional, hallowed royal necropolis at Abydos when planning his own funerary provision. His vast tomb made a greater use of dressed limestone – for the lining of the burial chamber – than any previous monument, pointing the way to the extensive use of stone in his successor's reign. The grave goods were no less impressive, bearing witness to the skill and sophistication of the royal workshops: dolomite limestone vases with sheet-gold covers, a royal sceptre made from gold and the precious stone sard, and a bronze ewer and basin. These final items are the earliest bronze objects known from Egypt; the tin required for their manufacture must have come from Anatolia, and its procurement demonstrates the effectiveness of renewed trade with the eastern Mediterranean in Khasekhemwy's reign.

Like his predecessors of the 1st Dynasty, Khasekhemwy chose to complement his tomb (designed for security) with a funerary

enclosure (designed for publicity) situated on the low desert, facing the town of Abydos. It is known today as the Shunet el-Zebib ('storehouse of raisins' in Arabic, reflecting its more recent use) and is a truly impressive structure. More than 4,500 years after it was built, it still towers over the surrounding landscape. Its eastern wall, closest to the town, was decorated with alternating recesses and buttresses, to resemble the façade of the royal compound at Memphis (ancient Ineb-hedj, 'white wall') and hence to proclaim its kingly associations. In this and other respects, Khasekhemwy's enclosure paved the way for the funerary monument built by his successor, Djoser (no. 5).

Hence, in its ambition and grandeur, the reign of Khasekhemwy foreshadows the Pyramid Age. His political achievements re-established the internal stability and prosperity needed for the great cultural achievements of his successors.



## 5 DJOSER BUILDER OF THE STEP PYRAMID

Pyramids are the quintessential, iconic monuments of ancient Egypt. In their architectural sophistication, and the extraordinary organizational and logistical achievement they represent, they underline the age in which they were built as the first, great period of Egyptian civilization, when the resources of the country were harnessed and directed, as never before, towards state construction projects. In the annals of ancient Egypt, a special place is reserved, therefore, for the king whose reign witnessed the inauguration of this tradition of monumental stone architecture. Attested on contemporary monuments only by his Horus-name Netjerikhet – '(Horus is) the most divine (member) of the corporation (of gods)' – he is better known by the name that appears in later sources, Djoser ('holy').

Djoser was a member of the same royal family as his immediate predecessor, Khasekhemwy (no. 4). The latter's wife and the mother

of his children, Nimaathap, was known in the reign of Djoser as 'the king's mother'. No inscription explicitly states that Djoser was Khasekhemwy's son, but the circumstantial evidence makes it very likely. Where Djoser did make a break with previous royal tradition was in the geographical focus of his activities – his surviving buildings are concentrated in the north rather than in the south of the country – and in the location and design of his mortuary complex. The Step Pyramid dominates modern accounts of Djoser's reign as it does the Saqqara plateau where it was built. It represented a turning-point: in architecture, being the first monument in Egypt to be finished entirely in dressed limestone; in construction techniques, giving engineers the opportunity to begin exploiting the full potential of stone as a building material; and in organization, necessitating and prompting the development of systematic regional government and a professional bureaucracy.

The rise of an official class, represented in large-scale statuary, is a key characteristic of Djoser's reign. The leading men of his court are the earliest group of high-ranking dignitaries whose identities are known. Besides the king's chief minister Imhotep (no. 7), there were the district administrators, Ankh and Sepa, who also held a number of important priestly offices between them; the Controller of the Royal Bark (the king's state boat), Ankhwa; the Chief Dentist, Hesira (no. 6); and Khabausokar, the controller of the royal workshops in which the statues of all these individuals were made. His artisans also created representations of Djoser's female relatives: his wife Hetephernebtj (who may also have been a daughter of the previous king Khasekhemwy), known by the sobriquet 'she who sees Horus (i.e. the king)'; his daughter, Intkaes, and another princess, 'the king's daughter of his body', Redji, whose face shows clear similarities with relief representations of Djoser. The fine, seated basalt figure of Redji is the earliest surviving example of a statue depicting a named, female member of the Egyptian royal family.

The only surviving three-dimensional sculpture of the king himself is a seated, life-size statue from the *serdab* (statue chamber) of his pyramid, showing him as he wished to be remembered: dressed in the long, tight-fitting robe associated with the *sed*-festival; wearing

the royal *nemes* headdress over a heavy wig; his face characterized by prominent, all-hearing ears; high cheekbones, thick lips and a wide mouth giving him a look of grim determination.

Djoser's reign witnessed an upsurge in creativity which extended to royal iconography. Statue bases from the Step Pyramid complex show the heads of Asiatics and Libyans, the traditional enemies of Egypt; by having himself depicted standing on his foes, Djoser showed that he was performing the primary duty of the Egyptian king – to defend the country – and made a powerful point to other would-be opponents. The innovative architecture of the Step Pyramid complex put particular emphasis on royal ideology, by providing eternal settings for important royal rituals. The great court in front of the pyramid formed a backdrop for the king's formal appearances and an arena for the ceremony of 'encompassing the field', where he strode around symbolic territorial markers to reassert his claim to Egypt. To the south of the pyramid, a separate court was designed as an eternal stage-set for the *sed*-festival (royal jubilee), at which the king would receive the homage of people and gods before being crowned again to mark the rejuvenation of his reign. Djoser's *sed*-festival was probably the occasion which prompted the construction of a shrine to the ennead (group of nine gods) at Heliopolis (ancient Iunu). The king's patronage of this site reflected the growing importance of its local cult, that of the sun-god Ra, and its associated priesthood.

Aside from construction projects at Saqqara and Heliopolis, Djoser also sent mining expeditions to the Wadi Maghara in southwestern Sinai, to bring back precious turquoise and perhaps copper for the royal workshops. At Beit Khallaf in Upper Egypt, the largest private tombs yet seen were built during his reign; one of them may have been the funerary monument of his own mother, Nimaathap. Other than these isolated glimpses, the events of Djoser's reign are attested only from much later inscriptions, such as the Famine Stela carved in the reign of Ptolemy V. At a remove of 2,500 years, it can scarcely be used as a reliable source, but it does demonstrate the longevity of Djoser's legacy.

More than a millennium after his death, the Ramesside court compiled the king list known as the Turin Canon, dividing the

rulers of Egypt into major historical groupings. When the scribe came to the name of Djoser, he changed the ink in his pen and wrote in red rather than the usual black. He was in no doubt that the accession of Djoser marked the beginning of a new era: the age of the pyramids.



## 6 HESIRA CHIEF DENTIST AT THE COURT OF DJOSER

Health care, at least for the governing elite, was surprisingly advanced in ancient Egypt, and was developed at an early period. A medical treatment manual addressing a wide variety of conditions is thought to date back to the Old Kingdom; while Merka, a high official at the end of the 1st Dynasty, held the title of 'scorpion doctor', among many others. Medical knowledge seems to have been acquired in the course of more general scholarship, and healthcare practitioners were seldom narrow specialists; rather, they exercised their skills as part of a portfolio of activities, in keeping with the broadly based nature of ancient Egyptian authority. A good example is Hesira, an official at the court of King Djoser and the first recorded dentist in history.

Hesira – also known by the short form of his name, Hesi – was not merely a dentist: he was Chief of Dentists, suggesting an already established profession. He was a member of the king's inner circle and owed his seniority, not so much to his knowledge of dentistry, as to his literacy: at a time when the scribal class (from which the bureaucracy was drawn) was still small, Hesira was Master of the Royal Scribes, and hence one of the leading administrators in government. To be a scribe was to have access to the levers of power. Little wonder, then, that Hesira always had himself depicted with his insignia of office, the scribal equipment of ink-palette, pen-holder and pigment bag. Within the administration, one of his major duties was overseeing the recruitment of *corvée* labour for state construction projects, in his capacity as 'greatest of tens of Upper Egypt'.

A feature of ancient Egypt throughout its history was the combination of civil and religious office in a single individual. Hesira was no exception. Although a man of essentially secular learning, he none the less held posts in the priesthoods of three important early cults: the fertility god Min; the lioness-goddess Mehit; and the falcon-god of Pe (Greek Buto, modern Tell el-Fara'in), Horus the Harpooner. This last office brought Hesira the added honour of being a Great One of Pe.

Of course, having achieved status and wealth, he did what any Egyptian would have done in a similar position: he commissioned a large and splendid tomb to guarantee his affluence throughout eternity. Hesira's tomb was built to the north of his monarch's Step Pyramid complex. It was decorated with wall paintings of funerary equipment – vases, chests and board games – and eleven recessed niches, each of which originally held an intricately sculpted wooden panel (fig. 2). Six of these panels have survived, and are among the finest reliefs from ancient Egypt in any medium; the modelling of anatomical details is especially notable. The panels show Hesira, surrounded by texts giving his titles and epithets, at various stages of his life. Even as a young man, he wore a rather sullen expression with a downturned mouth and narrow eyes. As an older man, his face was creased and wrinkled, but maintained the same sour look. He was evidently a follower of the latest court fashions, which included sporting a thin moustache and wearing a short, round wig with straight locks. Particularly characteristic of the Egyptian ruling class is his strong, aquiline nose. Finally, Hesira had a distinctly raised chin, suggesting a certain arrogance: although he lived more than 4,500 years ago, Djoser's Chief Dentist and Master of the Royal Scribes seems to have displayed the attitude of senior bureaucrats throughout history.



## 7 IMHOTEP ARCHITECT AND SAGE WHO BECAME A GOD

The radical idea of taking the single-stepped royal tomb of the 1st and 2nd Dynasties and transforming it into a far more imposing structure, by placing one step on top of another, and so upwards to the apex – in short, the concept of the pyramid – was a defining moment in the long course of pharaonic civilization. Tradition has ascribed this remarkable innovation to an individual who has been called ‘the greatest intellect of the Early Dynastic Period’ and who was to become synonymous with knowledge, both practical and magical. His name echoes down the forty-six centuries since his architectural creation first took shape on the Saqqara plateau, and has come to stand in popular culture for ancient Egypt itself: Imhotep.

Given the early period at which he lived and worked, it is not surprising that the contemporary evidence for Imhotep is rather meagre. Indeed, he is named only twice in 3rd Dynasty contexts: once on the base of a statue of King Djoser from the Step Pyramid complex, and again in a graffito on the enclosure wall of the pyramid complex of Djoser's successor, Sekhemkhet. None the less, these two attestations tell us a great deal about Imhotep's position at court and his career. The statue base of Djoser which names Imhotep was originally set up in a small room on the south side of the entrance colonnade leading to the Great Court of the Step Pyramid complex. It would thus have been passed by all those entering or leaving the monument. This very public location, combined with the naming of a private individual on the base of a royal statue, demonstrates Imhotep's pre-eminent rank at Djoser's court. The statue base gives his titles as Royal Seal-Bearer, First Under the King, Ruler of the Great Estate, member of the elite, Greatest of Seers, and Overseer of Sculptors and Painters; with the possible exception of the last title, there is nothing explicit to link him with the design or construction of the king's funerary monument. But who else, except the architect and inspiration behind the Step Pyramid, would have been given such a prominent place in its final set-up? The graffito from the principal monument of the next reign suggests that Imhotep's skills as an architect were prized

by Djoser's successor, too; and that the great man, late in life, had a hand in designing Egypt's second pyramid, thus developing the tradition that he himself had started.

According to much later sources, Imhotep's wife was called Renpetnefret, his mother Khereduankh and his father Kanefer. In the absence of further 3rd Dynasty texts there is no way of verifying this information; but the suggestion that Kanefer was himself a Superintendent of Royal Works certainly makes sense, as it explains how a man such as Imhotep could have become so well acquainted with the architectural, technological and organizational aspects of major construction projects. These skills were stretched to the limit in creating an entirely novel monument for Djoser. The world's first large-scale stone building involved, among other things, the quarrying, transportation, setting, dressing and decorating of nearly a million tons of limestone: an unprecedented feat of engineering and logistics.

It is little wonder, therefore, that, after his death at the end of the 3rd Dynasty, a host of myths and legends grew up around the great Imhotep. Wisdom literature was ascribed to him: one of the *Songs of the Harper* (a series of songs written in the Middle and New Kingdoms) contained the lines: 'I have heard the sayings of Imhotep... which we quoted in proverbs so much.' By the 18th Dynasty, Imhotep had become the focus of popular veneration; libations were offered to him, and he was regarded as the patron of scribes. In the Late Period, with tourists visiting the Step Pyramid in greater numbers, Imhotep's reputation grew, and he was recognized as the son of the god Ptah; indeed he was himself deified as a god of writing, architecture, wisdom and medicine (fig. 3). In the 30th Dynasty, the cult of Imhotep was one of the most important in the Memphite area, receiving royal patronage. The last native-born ruler of Egypt, Nakhthorheb (no. 95), called himself 'beloved of Imhotep son of Ptah', while the king's subjects worshipped Imhotep as 'the august god who gives life to the people'. In common with other popular deities, he was seen as a healer, and it was in this context that he subsequently became closely identified with the Greek god of medicine, Asclepius.

The cult of Imhotep reached its apogee under the Ptolemies. The main centres of worship and pilgrimage were the temple of Ptah at

Memphis and the Asklepion at Saqqara (believed to be Imhotep's burial-place), but other shrines were built throughout the country, for example at Deir el-Medina in western Thebes, at Heliopolis at the base of the Delta and at Xoïs in the north-central Delta. A Ptolemaic stela, purporting to date to the reign of Djoser, was carved on the island of Sehel in the First Cataract; it told of how the king consulted Imhotep over how best to bring to an end seven years of famine. Nearby, on the island of Philae, Ptolemy V built a small temple to Imhotep from where his cult spread southwards into Nubia, even as far as Meroë. At Edfu, an inscription credited Imhotep with inventing the principles of temple architecture, thus remembering the origins of his fame. At the various shrines dedicated to Imhotep, devotees paid for images of the sage to be presented as votive offerings; almost 400 bronze statues are known, mostly from Memphis and Saqqara. They depicted him as a scribe, with an unrolled papyrus; as a priest, with a long apron; or as the son of Ptah, wearing a skull-cap.

As a god of healing and medicine, Imhotep continued to be venerated into the Roman Period; in the temple of Dendera, he was credited with arcane knowledge of astronomy and astrology. Thus began the final, bizarre chapter in the posthumous life of the 3rd Dynasty official. He became a figure in popular romances, while an Arabic text of the tenth century AD mentioned him as an alchemist. Magician, healer, sage, scribe: the many incarnations in which Imhotep was venerated all reflect the monumental achievement of the Step Pyramid complex which changed Egypt and the ancient Egyptians forever. It is indeed fitting that the reputation of the man who created the defining symbol of Egyptian civilization should have survived longer than that of any other of his countrymen.



## 8 METJEN CAREER CIVIL SERVANT

In the 3rd Dynasty, perhaps for the first time, it became possible for individuals of humble origins to rise by their own talents through the ranks of the administration to the highest echelons of government. The opening up of the bureaucracy to men of non-royal background was probably an inevitable result of the greater professionalization required for pyramid-building. It also had the effect, naturally, of widening the pool of talent available to the king in the allocation of important responsibilities. Metjen, a career civil servant whose life spanned virtually the entire 3rd Dynasty, exemplified this new meritocracy.

Metjen's tomb at Saqqara contains the earliest extensive autobiographical inscription from ancient Egypt. It charts his career from its unspectacular beginning to its impressive conclusion. Given the Lower Egyptian geographical focus of his career, it seems likely that Metjen was born somewhere in the Delta. His father Inpuemankh was a judge and scribe, so Metjen would have been brought up to read and write, a prerequisite for government office. His first job was as a scribe, too, with responsibility for a storehouse of provisions and its contents: in other words, a small cog in the great machine of the Egyptian redistributive economy.

His aptitude for accountancy must have come to the attention of his superiors in the central government, for he was duly promoted to be Under Field-Judge – responsible for determining field boundaries, a crucial role in an agricultural economy – and local governor of Xoïs, a town in the north-central Delta which may have been Metjen's birthplace. A further promotion, to Judge of All Land Disputes, followed, his first government-level post. From there, his talents swiftly brought him new and greater responsibilities, including overseeing the national flax-harvest, a key crop, essential for the manufacture of linen.

At the height of his career, Metjen returned to his background of local government, as regional administrator, on behalf of the king, in a host of Delta nomes (provinces). At one time or another, he

controlled the 2nd (Letopolite), 5th (Saite), 6th (Xoite), 7th (Harpoon) and 16th (Mendesian) nomes of Lower Egypt, comprising a great swathe of the northern Delta; he was also Palace-Ruler (administrator appointed by the king) of two townships, and the governor of a fortress. Outside the Delta, he administered 'the cow stronghold', perhaps one of the western oases, and held the associated positions of Desert Governor and Master of the Hunt. In the eastern Fayum, he was a district administrator and 'ruler of the palace towns of the southern lake', in other words the pleasure-palaces established by Egyptian kings on the shores of Lake Fayum. A slight anomaly, given the Lower Egyptian focus of his other responsibilities, was the post of administrator, nomarch (provincial governor) and Overseer of Commissions in the 17th (Jackal) nome of Upper Egypt.

To add to the 50 arouras (13.5 ha, 33 acres) of land he inherited from his mother Nebset under the terms of her will, Metjen was liberally rewarded for his loyal service with further, substantial grants of land and provisions from the state. In addition, an extensive estate was established to provide income in perpetuity for his mortuary cult. Perhaps the gift from the state of which he was proudest, however, was his house. Metjen's description conjures up the image of an ideal home, with all the features a person of wealth and status would have expected: 'An estate 200 cubits (105 m, 343 ft) long by 200 cubits wide, with a wall equipped and set with good wood, a very big pool made in it, and planted with figs and grapes.' The Delta had been the centre of Egyptian wine-making since at least the 1st Dynasty, and Metjen was clearly an enthusiastic grower since, in addition to the vines planted around his house, he also had a separate, walled vineyard. Metjen thus lived out the remainder of his days in considerable comfort, surrounded by the luxuries that were the reward, not of birth, but of merit.

