

# Ancient Egypt

*What did Ancient Egyptians believe about  
life and death?*

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*Ancient Egypt*  
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# Foreword

**I**nquiry-based learning is a major component of humanities teaching in Australia and abroad. The inquiry approach first emerged in the physical sciences and was applied to the humanities following work done by John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and others on psychological and social development. The approach has been employed in various learning contexts by J.S. Bruner, Joe Exline, Dan Apple, Cornelia Bruner and the Education Development Center, among others.

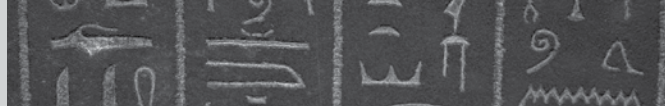
In the Australian context, inquiry has come to form a major part of curriculum in History and other subjects. Historical inquiry involves the retrieval, comprehension and interpretation of sources, and judgement guided by principles that are intrinsic to the discipline. Inquiry yields knowledge that is based on the available evidence but which remains open to further debate and reinterpretation. The method fosters in students the ability to recognise varying interpretations of history and to determine the difference between fact and opinion.

The inquiry method is based on the proposition that learning should be structured around a series of relevant and targeted questions, often developed in partnership with students, rather than the traditional method of a teacher (expert) imparting an established set of facts to students (recipients). Good inquiry questions will be intriguing for students and teachers alike.

Inquiry units tend to encourage curiosity, imagination, detective work, interaction, physical movement and debate. In recent years some educators have combined inquiry and creativity tasks by requiring students to design their own models and constructions.

In the History classroom, the opening lesson of an inquiry unit often centres on a curious image or item which students are asked to speculate upon. The teacher might ask questions like ‘What do you think is going on here?’, ‘When might this image have been created?’ and so on. After some initial hypotheses and discussions, the teacher might explain the origin and significance of the image before introducing the main inquiry question. This is usually a broad, over-arching question that ‘frames’ the unit. This framing question (for our purposes, Inquiry Question 1) will be kept in mind throughout the study and completed in full at the end of the unit. The teacher also sets several other inquiry questions targeting specific points – these can usually be answered in one or two lessons each.

As they go through the unit, students examine a set of historical sources. These sources, comprising documents, images, statistics, news clippings or artistic works, are used as evidence with which to answer the inquiry questions. Through a range of enjoyable tasks, students respond creatively and form opinions of their own on the questions and issue raised.



Inquiry activities also require students to:

- form hypotheses
- conduct research
- analyse sources
- synthesise ideas
- understand context and chronology
- articulate and justify an argument.

The most important part of the process, however, is the sense of surprise and enthusiasm that is created when teacher and students set about solving a puzzle together.

I trust this series will give you many lively ideas for your classroom.

**Ingrid Purnell, Editor**

*The HTAV would like to thank Dr Rosalie Triolo and Emily Board for their expertise and assistance in developing the Inquiry-based Learning series.*



# Overview

## *What did Ancient Egyptians believe about life and death?*

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Rarely has a civilisation been so focused upon the afterlife as Ancient Egypt (c. 3150 BCE–30 BCE). From the predynastic period, through the complexities and wonders of the kingdoms, to the Ptolemaic period, one thing was abundantly clear – Ancient Egyptians lived with certain knowledge of an afterlife. Although over time this belief was refined, and customs were changed accordingly, the afterlife remained central to Ancient Egyptian beliefs.

To gain a place in the afterlife was a very complex affair. Eternal life was only granted to those who were meticulous in their preparations and, even then, the journey of the dead soul was a dangerous one requiring detailed knowledge of spells and funerary texts. Eternal life was by no means assured: even if the soul survived the perilous journey, answering the demon gatekeepers correctly and successfully navigating the maze, it had to face judgement by the god of the dead, Osiris. Only Osiris could grant entry, weighing the heart of the individual against the feather of Maat, goddess of truth and justice. Those whose hearts weighed more than the feather faced a violent end at the hands (or rather jaws) of the vicious beast Ammit. Such souls ceased to exist – a truly terrifying prospect for any Ancient Egyptian.

For those who did gain entry to the kingdom of Osiris, all the necessities of life were provided. In the Field of Reeds, the soul lived on in luxury with the gods. The Field of Reeds resembled Egypt but in an idealised form – fields were green, harvests were abundant and individuals lived perfect lives, clothed in finery and surrounded by riches. Servants carried out the

menial tasks whilst the pharaohs became one with the gods.

### **RELIGION AND DAILY LIFE**

Overwhelmingly, Ancient Egyptian religion was polytheistic in nature, with each major town having its own deity and temple. Over 2000 gods and goddesses coexisted and between them they were responsible for the prosperity, protection and survival of Egyptian civilisation. Ancient Egyptians lived to please the gods, building monuments in their honour, making offerings to their names and worshipping deities each day. The pharaoh acted as a bridge between the worlds of mortal man and immortal gods. The pharaoh's power was derived from the gods and only the gods could ensure the stability of the state. The pharaoh's role was immense; he or she made certain that temples were built, gods were honoured, offerings were made and in return the gods ensured that the harvests were good, the Nile flooded at the right time, Egypt flourished and the afterlife was attainable.

Clearly, religion and daily life were intricately linked. The pharaoh was the head of the priesthood but, in practical terms, local priests worked on the pharaoh's behalf, performing religious ceremonies and rites. During the New Kingdom period (after 1540 BCE) the priesthood became a separate group within society and the high priest enjoyed a powerful position in the hierarchy. Ordinary Egyptians rarely witnessed the rituals of the priesthood since these took place in the inner sanctums of temples; rather, they would make their offerings to local deities and ancestors at smaller shrines, often within the home.





## TO THE GRAVE

Early in the Ancient Egyptian period, people were buried in shallow desert graves, which often meant bodies dried out quickly. With no moisture, bacteria did not develop and significant decay did not occur. The body held its basic form. These naturally preserved bodies may have inspired the Egyptian belief in eternal life, perhaps leading to the practice of mummification.

For almost 3000 years wealthy Egyptians were buried in tombs and had their bodies embalmed. It was believed that a person's soul, *ba*, could only live forever if it was able to return to the physical body. Thus, preserving the corpse became an elaborate art, carried out by priests over a period of seventy days. At the end of this period the mummy would be placed in a coffin and buried with great ceremony.

Wealthy Egyptians were buried with all sorts of items which reflected their interests in life and which, it was thought, would prove useful in the afterlife. Animals too were mummified, perhaps as offerings to the gods; animal cemeteries have been discovered, containing the remains of cats, crocodiles and even a baboon.

## TOMBS

Tombs were much more than just a place of eternal rest and both the art and artefacts found in them provide tangible evidence of Ancient Egyptian beliefs. Wall paintings were rarely just for decoration; instead they often acted as a guide for the soul in its journey to the Field of Reeds. These paintings suggest Egyptian belief in the afterlife and reveal a great deal about the person for whom the tomb was built; often the things a person enjoyed in life formed the basis of the art.

Tombs were filled with all manner of items and the wealthier the occupant the richer the quantity and variety. Mummies were buried with food and drink, furniture and beds, boats and chariots, clothes and jewellery, perfumes and ointments, and even model servants who would carry out the menial tasks in the next life.

The riches interred in these tombs were common knowledge and, often, too tempting to be left in place; many tombs were robbed soon

after the burial. The few valuables that have survived – most famously in the tomb of the boy pharaoh, Tutankhamun – express a lot about Ancient Egyptian daily life, religion and beliefs.

It is this evidence that will guide our investigation into Ancient Egyptian beliefs about life and death.

## ABOUT THIS UNIT

The unit is based around five Inquiry Questions, which are given below. Inquiry Question 1 is an over-arching question that will introduce the study, be kept in mind throughout, and answered by students in full at the end. The unit is aimed at the Year 7–8 level.

By the end of the unit students should be able to:

- Describe key features of daily life in Ancient Egypt;
- Describe Ancient Egyptian burial rituals and explain key beliefs connected with the afterlife;
- Extract information from a variety of primary and secondary sources;
- Reach conclusions based on the interpretation of evidence.

The sources appearing at the end of the unit will be drawn on throughout the investigation. They comprise primary and secondary sources in both written and visual formats.

Some Inquiry Questions are accompanied by teacher notes, which provide more detail about the sources used. **Teachers should draw upon these as they assist students with activities.**

The Inquiry Questions in this unit are:

1. What did Ancient Egyptians believe about life and death?
2. How were Ancient Egyptians governed?
3. How were dead bodies treated?
4. What do uncovered tombs reveal about Ancient Egypt?
5. Were Ancient Egyptians treated better in life or in death?

For research tasks see the list of useful resources on p. 38.



# Inquiry Question 1

*What did Ancient Egyptians believe about life and death?*

## ACTIVITY 1: WHAT'S GOING ON?

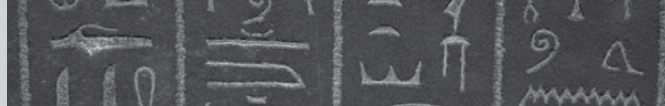
1. Examine Source 1 (tomb of Nakht) (p. 20). If possible, view it on an interactive whiteboard or overhead projector. (Colour version available on accompanying CD.)
2. In pairs, discuss the source for one minute. Write down **three** pieces of information you are able to derive from it, particularly about the jobs people are doing, the technologies used and the level of co-operation shown.
3. Discuss your observations with the class. Note that there are three scenes contained within the one illustration. The order of the scenes goes from the bottom to the top. What might be the role and importance of the seated man?
4. Then discuss the following: What jobs are being done in the scene at the bottom? What are the differences between the portrayals of the workers as opposed to the overseer? How much bigger than the workers would the overseer be if he stood up? How many workers are there in the fields? What do these facts suggest about Ancient Egyptian society? Was there order or chaos? Explain your answer. Given that tomb illustrations often showed the role that an individual had during their lifetime (because that role was also important for the afterlife), might the overseer have been Nakht?
5. Now examine Source 2 (tomb of Sennedjem) (p. 21).
6. In pairs, make a list of at least **three** pieces of information you can derive from the illustration. What are the similarities and differences with Source 1? Who might the people be?
7. Discuss the following: What are the key features of Source 2? How many crops are shown? Who might the man and woman, dressed in their finest clothes and working in the fields, represent?
8. Examine the scene that appears second from the top in Source 2. The man and the woman appear to be worshipping the figures in the middle – could these be gods? Might the boat represent a journey?
9. As a class, discuss what the two sources express about Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife and their understanding of 'heaven.' How are the gods portrayed?

## ACTIVITY 2: BELIEFS ABOUT DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

Although individual ideas about the afterlife changed over time, Ancient Egyptians were always convinced that they lived on after death and therefore preparations had to be made prior to death. These preparations were often elaborate and correct rituals had to be followed. To help the deceased, the Book of the Dead was often written on tomb walls and illustrated how the deceased should behave in the afterlife. Reaching the Field of Reeds, and eternal life with Osiris, was not easy and depended upon the way one lived his or her life. The deceased's heart was weighed against the feather of truth.

1. Examine Source 3 (Book of the Dead) (p. 22).
2. Working individually, identify story is being told in the image, starting from the top-left corner and continuing in an anti-clockwise direction. When you think you have worked the story out, based on the evidence and your own knowledge, write it out in five steps, with Step 1 describing what happens in the top-left corner, Step 2 describing what happens in the bottom-left corner, and so on, until you finish at the bottom-right corner. Refer to significant names and symbols.





3. On the board, note down what is happening at each step. Consider contrary possibilities. Ensure you have copied down the correct steps once the teacher has gone through them.
4. Discuss how the evidence reveals that life and death in Ancient Egypt were closely linked. What was seen to be the significance of justice, truth and good deeds in this life and the next?

### ACTIVITY 3: JOURNEY OF THE DEAD

1. Create a table of two columns. In the left column list the various journeys people take today, e.g. to work, to shops, to the football, overseas etc. In the right column suggest which mode of transport is best suited to each type of journey and what sort of luggage people might take.
2. Examine Source 4 (Ra on solar boat) (p. 23), a drawing based on an image found on a tomb wall. Discuss why the Ancient Egyptians might have believed that the sun god travelled in a boat.
3. Drawing on sources in this book and elsewhere, create a Venn diagram titled 'Rituals and Beliefs about the Living and the Dead in Ancient Egypt.' In one circle list features of Ancient Egyptian rituals and beliefs regarding the living; in the other circle list rituals and beliefs regarding the dead. Where the circles intersect place rituals and beliefs common to both. Which of the three segments is most filled? Are you surprised by these findings? What do they reveal about the link between life and death in Ancient Egypt?

### TEACHER NOTES

Source 1: The illustration comes from the tomb of a man called Nakht, who died around 1395 BCE. Nakht was an important official during the reign of the pharaoh Tuthmosis IV (thought to be the great-grandfather of Tutankhamun). In the scene at the bottom, the fields are being prepared, ploughed and planted. Above that, the crops are being harvested, while in the scenes at the top the grain is being threshed. All this takes place under the watchful eye of an overseer. In Ancient Egypt social importance was often reflected in the relative size of individuals depicted in illustrations and statues.

Source 2: This is an illustration taken from the wall of a tomb for a man called Sennedjem, who lived at Deir el-Medina, a town close to the Valley of the Kings. This town was built expressly to house the craftsmen who worked on the royal tombs and was continuously inhabited for a period of almost 500 years, from c. 1520 BCE to 1050 BCE. The two sources show similar activities centred on the agricultural activities of ploughing, sowing and harvesting. Only two individuals are shown in Source 2 working the fields and an additional scene appears at the top. The bottom scene shows date palms heavily laden with fruit; the middle scenes show tall and healthy crops. At the top, the mummified figure has its mouth open to allow the spirit to journey into the afterlife. Heaven for the Ancient Egyptians resembled daily life, but in a more plentiful and perfect form. Sennedjem and his wife are shown working in the fields but in reality they would have expected servants to do this for them.

Source 3: *Step 1* (going anti-clockwise from top-left): The deceased must provide an account of their life deeds, symbolised by the ankh, to a panel of fourteen judges. *Step 2*: The jackal-headed god, Anubis, leads the deceased to the hall of judgement. *Step 3*: The deceased's heart is weighed against the feather of Maat, goddess of truth and justice. If the heart is heavier it shows that evil deeds outweigh good deeds and the beast Ammit will eat it, condemning the deceased to oblivion. *Step 4*: If the feather is heavier, the scribe of the gods, Thoth, records the outcome and the deceased is led by Horus to Osiris. *Step 5*: Together Osiris and Isis welcome the deceased into the afterlife.

Source 4: When Ancient Egyptians died they were packing for eternity. Even the mode of transport was often buried with them, sometimes life-size, mostly as a model. The dead pharaoh would join the sun god, Ra, in his daily passage across the sky. Ra's solar boat would travel from the land of the living in the east to the land of the dead in the west. Point out that Egyptians themselves largely travelled by boat.



## SOURCE 17

Workers' cemeteries at Deir el-Medina.



Exterior of tomb (top) and the Theban necropolis (bottom) at Deir el-Medina.



## SOURCE 18

Aspects of daily life.

### Family life

The people of ancient Egypt highly valued family life. They treasured children and regarded them as a great blessing. In the lower class families, the mother raised the children. The wealthy and nobility had slaves and servants that helped take care of the children by attending to their daily needs. If a couple had no children, they would pray to the gods and goddesses for help. They would also place letters at the tombs of dead relatives asking them to use their influence with the gods. Magic was also used as an attempt to have children. In event that a couple still could not conceive a child, adoption was also an option.

Although women were expected to obey their fathers and husbands, they were equal to men in many ways. They had the legal right to participate in business deals, own land, and were expected to represent themselves in court cases. Women even faced the same penalties as men. Sometimes wives and mothers of pharaohs were the 'real' ruling power in government, though they ruled unbeknown to common people. Queen Hatshepsut was the only woman who ruled outright by declaring herself pharaoh. An Egyptian wife and mother were highly respected in this ancient society.

Young boys learned a trade or craft from their fathers or an artisan. Young girls worked and received their training at home with their mothers. Those who could afford it sent their sons, from about age 7, to school to study religion, reading, writing and arithmetic. Even though there is no evidence of schools for girls, some were home-taught to read and write and some even became doctors.

Splendours of Ancient Egypt Educational Guide, 1999, [www2.sptimes.com/Egypt/EgyptCredit.4.2.html](http://www2.sptimes.com/Egypt/EgyptCredit.4.2.html).

### Peasants and slaves

Peasants comprised as much as eighty per cent of the Egyptian population (David, 1998: 91). The majority of peasants worked in the fields producing crops, while some worked as servants in the homes of wealthy nobles. During the flooding season, which lasted up to three months, peasants often worked on large building projects for the government.

Slaves were most commonly prisoners of war. Although the pyramids are often depicted as being built by slaves, there is little historical evidences of this. The historical evidence suggests that farmers and other workers were employed during the flood season to erect the pyramids and other large building projects. It was not until the Middle Kingdom that large groups of slaves were present in Egypt. During the Old Kingdom, when the pyramids were built, there is no evidence that Egypt maintained a large population of slaves.

Slaves did not hold the same status in Ancient Egypt as slaves did during the time of the European expansion. For example, slaves could own land, marry freeborn people, and even employ servants. Slavery in Egypt did not mean total ownership, which is associated with the later concept of slavery.

Eric Rymer, 2000, [www.historylink101.net/egypt\\_1/a-pesants\\_slaves.htm](http://www.historylink101.net/egypt_1/a-pesants_slaves.htm) [www.ancient-egypt-online.com/daily-life-in-ancient-egypt.html](http://www.ancient-egypt-online.com/daily-life-in-ancient-egypt.html).