

## EXHIBITS

# Learning the Lessons Egypt Taught the Greeks

The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland is offering a spectacular exhibition entitled “Eternal Egypt,” a must-see for anyone who wishes to know more about where we all come from, culturally and historically. To this reviewer, it was an eye-opener, and tremendously exciting to recognize in these ancient Egyptians, kindred

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**Eternal Egypt:  
Masterworks of Ancient Art  
from the British Museum.**

Sept. 21, 2003-Jan. 18, 2004. At the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland. For more information: [www.thewalters.org](http://www.thewalters.org).

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spirits—people whom you would wish to know, who would perhaps be *sympatico* with those of us who are working to rescue our own beleaguered civilization from a new dark age.

The high point of Egyptian civilization, at least what we know of it today, was the time of the Old Kingdom, about 4,200 years ago. At some point, during the Sixth Dynasty (2345-2181 B.C.),<sup>1</sup> a high-level government official named Nefer-seshem-Re wrote the following epitaph to be placed in his tomb:

“I have done justice for the lord, and I have satisfied him with what he loves.

“I spoke the truth, and I did what was right.

“I spoke fairly, and I responded fairly. I seized the right moment, for the benefit of the people.

“I judged between two to reconcile them; I rescued the weak one from the stronger one, as much as it was in my power.

“I gave bread to the hungry; I

clothed the naked, and

“I brought one without a boat to land.

“I buried him who had no son, and I made a boat for him who lacked one.

“I respected my father; I pleased my mother, and I raised their children.”<sup>2</sup>

These extraordinarily modern ideas—justice, truth, fairness, protection of the weak by the strong, the common good—clearly reflect a high point of human civilization, a thousand years before Moses was born, and more than two thousand years before the birth of Christ.

Yet, as we know from looking at the long waves of history, the development of human civilization has not taken a straight path upward. It would be about 1,500-1,700 years before these same ideas would be transmitted from Egypt into Greece, to form the foundations of Western Civilization. Some 4,000 years after Nefer-seshem-Re wrote his inscription, these ideas would become the basis for the creation of the Ameri-



From the exhibition catalogue, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

FIGURE 1. “Seated Statue of Ankhw,” Old Kingdom, Third Dynasty (c. 2686-2613).

can Republic, the first such in all human history.

### Long Wave of History

In very brief summary, the history of ancient Egypt can be divided into three Kingdoms, each of which represented



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FIGURE 2. “Raised Relief: Daily Life, Children,” Old Kingdom, Fifth Dynasty (c. 2494-2345).

relative stability, if not always progress; these were separated by intermediate periods, which were characterized by instability, warfare, and conquest [SEE Box, p. 91]. The Old Kingdom (c. 2686-2181 B.C.) is when the Pyramids were built. Contrary to what you may have “learned” in school, or read in popular history books, the Great Pyramids at Giza were not built as artifacts of a “death cult,” or merely to lionize the Pharaohs; nor, as some liberal revisionists would have it, as massive slave-labor projects to employ a growing population.

The pyramids, constructed around 2600, were, in fact, *astronomical observatories*, whose shafts were situated so as to observe the three most important stars in the sky at that time (Orion’s brightest star, the North Star of the time, and Sirius).<sup>3</sup> The three Great Pyramids are aligned exactly as three stars in Orion’s belt are, with the third, smaller pyramid, slightly off-kilter from the other two—just to let us know, perhaps, that the Ancients had a vast knowledge of the heavens. The Sphinx was built much earlier, but whoever built it and the pyramids, did so with a knowledge of how the skies looked in 10,000 B.C. This date is the one specified in Plato’s *Timaeus* as the point where Egyptian civilization and knowledge begin.

As Susan Kokinda reports in her article, “Greece, Child of Egypt”<sup>4</sup>:

“Knowing that these stars and constellations were astronomically important, one can read the Pyramid texts, the *Book of the Dead*, and many other ancient Egyptian writings, as descriptions of the motions of celestial bodies. Certainly, that was their original purpose, not the “death cult” concept, which was introduced, in its most elaborate form by the Delphic priest Plutarch, and which dominates current discussions of ancient Egyptian religion.”

### Physical Economy

Now, let us see what the artists and poets of the Old Kingdom tell us about this period.

The first thing we see, is that the Egyptians of the Twenty-fifth century

B.C., i.e., when the Pyramids were new, had a clear concept of what we call today “physical economy,” that is, economic activity that supports a population, and provides for its posterity.

The “Seated Statue of Ankhwa” (c. 2686-2613) [SEE Figure 1], a portrait of a common shipwright and smith, is placed in the exhibition next to the poem by Nefer-seshem-Re quoted above. This stolid fellow, who holds his woodworking tool, an adze, looks like a hard worker, but also an intelligent one. The text inscribed in the stone tells us that Ankhwa was associated in some



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FIGURE 3. “Striding Figure of Meryrahashtef,” Old Kingdom, Sixth Dynasty (c. 2345-2181).

way with the court; the fact that the stone used for this sculpture was of high-quality granite, is an indication that it was produced in the royal atelier. All of this suggests that the skilled worker enjoyed a relatively elevated status in this period.

A limestone relief of “Daily Life and Children,” from the wall of a tomb in Giza from the Fifth Dynasty (2494-2345) [SEE Figure 2] gives more evidence of the Old Kingdom’s respect for the physical economy, and for the workers who made it possible. The top-most register illustrates three stages of boat-building; cutting down a tree (right); transporting a log (center); and sawing planks and scraping the deck with an adze (left). At the bottom of the tablet, three scenes illustrate the provisioning of food for the tomb. At the far right, four sailors catch fish in a net; next, two men lead a pair of donkeys laden with huge bags of grain.

In the “Striding Figure of Meryrahashtef,” from the Sixth Dynasty (2345-2181) [SEE Figure 3, and inside back cover, this issue], that is, from the same period as the Psalm-like poetry cited above, we have further confirmation that Egyptian culture recognized the unique nature of man, as distinct from, and above the beasts. Meryrahashtef would have been a modest-level official, with the title of “unique friend and lector priest.” Looking at this nude figure, we see that the Egyptian artist not only had a sophisticated grasp of human anatomy, but that he succeeded in portraying an individualized personality, conveyed through the facial expression, as well as the dynamic energy of the figure’s stance. Like the Greek statues of the Classical period, a sense of motion, in both body and mind, is produced, although the figure is motionless.

### The Middle Kingdom

When we proceed to the Middle Kingdom (2040-1650), which follows a period in which there is a brief dark age—about 140 years—we find that the delightful human qualities in Old Kingdom art have been replaced by a more somber, static aesthetic. Looking

at the statue of Sesostris I [SEE Figure 4], we find the kind of Egyptian art with which most of us are more familiar: A heavy stone sculpture, highly idealized, which seems to place more importance on the status than the personality of the individual. The overall impression that the art of this period conveys, is a society fearful of “rocking the boat,” lest the chaos of the dark age return.

Nonetheless, a glimmer of the Old Kingdom is caught by this sample of Twelfth Dynasty poetry, in which the concept of man’s mortality is considered:

**A Man Who Desires Death  
Argues with His Ba<sup>5</sup>**

Death is before me today,  
Such as the recovery of a sick  
man, such as going outdoors after  
confinement.  
Death is before me today,  
Such as the fragrance of myrrh,  
such as setting sail on a breezy  
day.  
Death is before me today,  
Such as the fragrance of lotus,  
such as sitting on the edge of  
drunkenness.  
Death is before me today,  
Such as a well-prepared path,  
such as a man who is coming  
home from war.

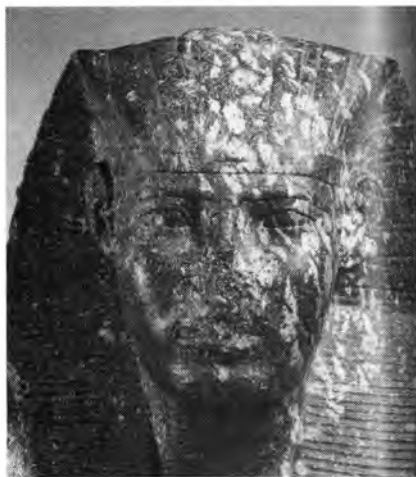


FIGURE 4. “Sesostris I,” Middle Kingdom, Twelfth Dynasty, reign of Sesostris I (c. 1965-1920).



FIGURE 5. “Papyrus with Satirical Vignettes” (details), New Kingdom, Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty (c. 1295-1069).

Death is before me today,  
Such as the clearing of the sky,  
such as when a man discovered  
what he has ignored.  
Death is before me today,  
Such as a man who is longing to  
see his home, when he has spent  
many years in captivity.

—Papyrus Berlin 3024,  
Twelfth Dynasty, 1985-1785.  
Translation by Regine Schulz.

**The New Kingdom**

An invasion around 1700 B.C. by a nomadic tribe known as the Hyksos, brought an end to the Middle Kingdom. However, the Temple of Ammon, located in Thebes, continued as a bastion of the ancient knowledge. It organized an expulsion of the Hyksos and the restoration of Egyptian rule around 1580. It was during the New Kingdom dark age that the Egyptian Cult of the Dead, which most Anglo-American historians seize on as the overriding characteristic of Ancient Egypt, arose. Yet, while the period of the New Kingdom is characterized overall by a degeneration in the arts and culture, the priests of the Temple of Ammon carried out a preservation of Egyptian culture similar to the Irish monks in their cloisters during Europe’s long dark age, who preserved the learning of the

Greeks, to be revived in the Fifteenth century Renaissance.

In a surprising contrast to the general dehumanization characteristic of this period, in which we find the distinction between man and beast increasingly blurred—men and gods with animal heads are commonly depicted—there is an outburst of satirical humor in a painted papyrus from Thebes, home of the Temple of Ammon, dated c. 1295-1069 [SEE Figure 5, and inside back cover, this issue]. In this work, sometimes called the “Animal Fable,” the artist seems to be poking fun at the very animal/man gods so favored by the ruling class. Animals are depicted in various civilized activities: a lion plays a board game with a gazelle, instead of eating it; in another scene, goats and geese are herded by their natural predators, the hyena, fox, and wild cat, who walk upright like shepherds. In this vignette, a large cat, possibly a tiger, carries a gosling in one hand. The final scene in the sequence shows the lion, who was earlier playing a table game with the gazelle, about to bed her.

Some scholars think that these vignettes derive from a type of popular literature known as “Animal Fables,” which must have been preserved as an oral tradition, since no written texts have survived. That they express a fine sense of irony and satire is clear, and is

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supported by the fact that the artisans of Deir el Medina, who produced them, were known to have been somewhat unruly and even disrespectful of their superiors (they went on strike several times because they were not paid). In fact, the period in which they worked was one of recurrent political tension and economic upheaval.

The New Kingdom collapsed c. 1070, along with most of the societies in the Eastern Mediterranean (Mycenaean Greece, Troy, the Hittite Empire), in the general upheaval which took place in the centuries surrounding the Trojan War. By this time, a series of “Mesopotamian” oligarchical societies, Assyria, Babylon, and finally Persia, attack Egypt.

In the Seventh century B.C., known as the Late Period, which includes the Persian Occupation, there was an attempt to revive the style, if not the humanist content, of the Old Kingdom. This style is called the “Archaic,” both in Egypt and in pre-Classical Greece. A limestone sculpture from Giza (again, land of the Pyramids), the “Standing Figure of Tjayasetimu” [SEE Figure 6, and inside back cover, this issue], is representative of this impulse. But compare Tjayasetimu with his predecessor Meryrahashtef [Figure 3] about 1,600 years earlier: While the pose is similar, and there is an effort to portray an individualized portrait, the later work lacks the spark of life, the unique personality

of the individual, that the ancient sculptor had captured.

Returning again to the poetry of the period—the rule of the Persian kings—we see how the culture has lost the idea of the beautiful, and instead, worships mammon:

#### Gold—The Divine Material

You are Re, the greatest of the deities, who appears lovely, and whose grace inspires love. . . .

[You are] majesty with your two sun-disks, with high and sharp horns,

[Your] beard is shiny, [and your] eyes are made of white gold adorned with turquoise,

[You] shining one with golden body. . . .

His bones are made of silver [and] his skin of gold,

His hair is made of real lapis lazuli [and] his teeth of turquoise,

[He is the] perfect god, who is living in his body.

—Great Amun’s Hymn,  
from the Amun [Ammon]

Temple at El-Hibe,

Twenty-seventh Dynasty.

Translation after Jan Assmann.

#### Saving Civilization

It is in the Late Period, under the reign of the Pharaoh Amasis (570-526) [SEE Figure 7] that the ancient knowledge of

## Periods and Important Kings of Ancient Egypt

(all dates are B.C.)

**Predynastic Period**, c. 5000-3100

**Early Dynastic Period**, c. 3100-2686

**Old Kingdom**, c. 2686-2181

Djoser, c. 2667-2648

Cheops, c. 2589-2566

Pepi I, c. 2321-2287

**First Intermediate Period**,  
c. 2181-2040

**Middle Kingdom**, c. 2040-1650

Mentuhotep II, c. 2055-2004

Sesostris III, c. 1874-1855

Amenemhat III, c. 1854-1808

**Second Intermediate Period**,  
c. 1750-1550

**New Kingdom**, c. 1550-1069

Hatshepsut, c. 1472-1458

Thutmosis III, c. 1479-1425

Amenhotep III, c. 1390-1352

Akhenaten, c. 1352-1336

Tutankhamun, c. 1336-1327

Seti I, c. 1294-1279

Rameses II, c. 1279-1213

**Third Intermediate Period**,  
c. 1069-656

Psusennes I, c. 1039-991

Osorkon II, c. 874-850

Shabako, c. 716-702

**Late Period and Persian Occupation**, 664-332

Psamtik I, 664-610

Amasis, 570-526

Nectanebo II, 360-343

**Greco-Roman Period**, 332 B.C.-  
A.D. 642

Alexander the Great, 332-323

Ptolemy II, 284-246

Cleopatra VII, 51-30

Augustus Caesar, 30 B.C.-A.D. 14





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FIGURE 6. "Standing Figure of Tjayasetimu," Late Period, early Twenty-sixth Dynasty (664-610).

Egypt was transmitted to Greece, through Solon, Thales, and Pythagoras. Amasis was the last great Pharaoh of Egypt, ruling during the Sixth century. In the last days of his reign, the Persians, who were then the dominant power, and would become the nemesis of Greece in the next century, controlled the Eastern Mediterranean. They would continue to dominate the region until Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332.

Amasis (his Greek name; he was born Ahmose II) forged alliances with the Greeks, as well as the Chaldeans, against the Persians. Under Amasis's 44-

year reign, according to the historian Herodotus, Egypt prospered, and agricultural output exceeded all previous records. The number of inhabited Egyptian cities reached as many as 20,000. Under Amasis's rule, Solon of Athens, the "Law-Giver," who wrote Athens' republican constitution, travelled to Egypt, as did the scientist-philosopher Thales and his student, the geometer Pythagoras.

In the *Timaeus*, Socrates' student Plato celebrates the importance of Egypt's contribution to civilization, and discusses the travels of Solon to Egypt. Through the voice of Plato's uncle Critias, we are told what happened when Solon visited the Egypt of Amasis, and conversed with the priests of Ammon:

"In the Delta of Egypt,' said Critias, 'where, at its head, the stream of the Nile parts in two, there is a certain district called the Saitic. The chief city in this district is Sais—the home of King Amasis—the founder of which, they say, is a goddess whose Egyptian name is Neith, and in Greek, as they assert, Athena. These people profess to be great lovers of Athens and in a measure akin to our people here. And Solon said that when he travelled there he was held in great esteem amongst them; moreover, when he was questioning such of their priests as were most versed in ancient lore about their early history, he discovered that neither he himself nor any other Greek knew anything at all, one might say, about such matters.

"And on one occasion, when he wished to draw them on to discourse on ancient history, he attempted to tell them the most ancient of our traditions, concerning Phoroneus, who was said to be the first man, and Niobe; and he went on to tell the legend about Deucalion and Pyrrha after the Flood, and how they survived it, and to give the genealogy of their descendants; and by recounting the number of years occupied by the events mentioned he tried to calculate the periods of time.

"Whereupon one of the priests, a prodigiously old man, said, 'O Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children:



From the exhibition catalogue, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

FIGURE 7. "Head of King Amasis," Twenty-sixth Dynasty (570-526).

there is not such a thing as an old Greek.' And on hearing this he asked, 'What mean you by this saying?' And the priest replied, 'You are young in soul, every one of you. For therein you possess not a single belief that is ancient and derived from old tradition, nor yet one science that is hoary with age.'" (21e-22c)

As in the Greece of Solon and Socrates, we again today face the prospect of a new dark age, unless we heed the lessons of history, and return to the *eternal* truths offered by our Egyptian forebears so many millennia ago.

—Bonnie James

1. Dates given are approximate; I am using those provided by the Walters exhibition. See the accompanying chronology.
2. Standardized text from the biography of Nefer-seshem-Re in his tomb at Saqqara, Sixth Dynasty. Translation by Regine Schulz.
3. See Susan Kokinda, "Greece, Child of Egypt," *New Federalist*, April 14, 2003 (Vol. XVII, No. 8).
4. *Ibid.*
5. The *ba*, according to the exhibition catalogue, is "an aspect of the personality or soul that remained active after death and was able to return to the tomb to receive offerings; usually pictured as a human-headed bird."