

# Egypt: Life in ancient Egypt



Painting from the Tomb of Nebamun  
Thebes, Egypt  
1370 BC

Visit resource for teachers

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## **Before your visit**

## Background information

By 6000 BC people had settled in the Nile Valley. The ancient Egyptian civilisation as we refer to it began in approximately 3000 BC when political control of the Nile Valley was unified under King Narmer. This civilisation lasted until 30 BC when the Romans conquered Egypt and subsequently it became part of the Roman Empire.

Ancient Egyptian life was shaped by the natural environment, especially the River Nile which was vital to the survival of the ancient Egyptians. The Nile provided, amongst other things, water for the crops, fish to catch, reeds to make papyrus and mud that could be used to make bricks for building. It was also the main travel route. The land beside the Nile provided fertile soil for farming while the geology of the surrounding desert provided natural mineral resources.

The ability to read and write was not common amongst the majority of the population. Those who received an education and learnt these skills were amongst the ruling elite or government scribes.

Ancient Egyptians entertained themselves in a variety of ways. They enjoyed listening to and playing music on instruments such as the harp or lyre. Children had different toys including balls and model animals. Board games such as Senet were popular. The Nile was also a source of much entertainment. People took trips in boats, fished, swam and even hunted crocodiles and hippopotamuses. Wealthier Egyptians enjoyed holding lavish parties with entertainment, food and drink.

The Egyptian climate consisted of hot summers and milder winters in the south whilst in the north there was a rainy, humid season in the spring. This is reflected in the clothing worn - robes normally made out of linen. These linen garments could be embellished with beads, fringes or pleats.

Wigs were worn by men or women and were often made from sheep's wool or human hair. They served a decorative function but may also have helped to protect the wearer's head from the sun. Jewellery was worn by both men and women and varied in material and design. Examples range from simple bead necklaces to elaborate gold head-pieces. Jewellery was often symbolic and items such as amulets were worn as good luck charms.

Ancient Egyptian objects found at archaeological sites are useful because they provide archaeologists with information about both physical actions and thought processes. Through the study of objects deductions can be made about the tools and techniques used to produce it, as well as the nature of its use.

The study of ancient Egypt is also supported by writing and pictures. The ancient Egyptians used a pictorial writing system known as hieroglyphs. These have been found carved and written on many different surfaces including papyrus, stone, brick, wood, plaster and metal. Writing can refer to ceremonial beliefs, such as in the Book of the Dead which was placed in tombs, or everyday life, for example a list of items sold by a merchant, a legal document or a letter between friends. The Egyptians also had a large number of pieces of recorded literature including tales, poems and hymns.

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Teaching history with 100 objects

Free online resources to support teachers working in the new history curriculum through object-based learning. Access information, images, and video as well as teaching ideas for lessons at Key Stages 1-3.

[www.teachinghistory100.org](http://www.teachinghistory100.org)

## Books

### For adults

Hart, George. *Egyptian Myths*, British Museum Press, 1990.

Spencer, A. J. (ed.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 2007.

### For children

Hart, George. *The British Museum Pocket Dictionary of Ancient Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, British Museum Press, 2001

Morris, Neil. *Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 2003.

Pemberton, D. and Harris, G. *The British Museum Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 2005.

Strudwick, Helen. *Pocket Timeline of Ancient Egypt*, British Museum Press, 2005.

## Gallery information

Rooms 62 and 63 contain objects connected with funerary practice in ancient Egypt including mummies, coffins and other tomb artefacts. The galleries also show the use of modern technology for investigating mummies, with x-ray and CAT-scan images of some of the exhibits.

Room 64 covers the development of early Egypt from the prehistoric Stone Age up to 3000 BC. It contains objects which reflect the change from a hunter-gatherer society to the beginnings of dynastic rule. Objects on display include pottery, stone tools, stone palettes and basketwork. The gallery contains an early natural sand-dried mummy and examples of early coffin burials.

## What is it like to visit these galleries?

All three galleries form part of the ancient Egyptian suite of galleries on the Upper Floor of the Museum. Rooms 62 and 63 tend to get very crowded while Room 64 is often quieter. All three galleries have doorways at both ends and the central pathway through the galleries serves as the main route from room to room. Room 63 has an additional two doors making it a cross-roads gallery with a lot of movement at the centre. You will tend to find that areas near the side wall cases are quieter even in a busy gallery.

## Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

## **General introductory activities**

- Discuss the concept of everyday life and the themes it covers such as food and drink, clothing, housing and religious beliefs.
- Discuss the effect of climate on everyday life. Compare the climate of modern Egypt and Britain. How does this effect everyday life in terms of things such as food, clothes, housing etc?

## **Activities to support gallery activities**

- Make a collection of everyday utensils. What are the utensils used for? How do they help people perform everyday tasks? (e.g. food preparation, cleaning, communicating, keeping warm.)
- Discuss what natural and processed materials were available to the ancient Egyptians. What were they used for?
- What sort of personal adornment do people wear nowadays? Look for examples in shopping catalogues. Why do people wear jewellery?
- Discuss what lucky charms we use nowadays.



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**During your visit**

## Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Rooms 62, 63 and 64. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## **Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers**

### **Gallery activity: Containers**

- Containers can tell us what was stored and used. For example, jars could store foodstuffs, such as grain, or toiletries, such as perfume. The container's material can indicate its cost and use.
- This activity encourages the students to use previous knowledge of ancient Egypt combined with visual study to draw conclusions about the use of containers.

### **Gallery activity: Everyday objects**

- Tomb objects can reflect the everyday life led by the tomb owner when alive.
- This activity encourages the students to think about daily life in ancient Egypt.

### **Gallery activity: Gods and goddesses**

- The ancient Egyptians believed in many different gods and goddesses (deities), each one with their own role to play in maintaining peace and harmony.
- This activity helps students to identify some of the key deities of ancient Egypt.

### **Gallery activity: Good luck amulets**

- Amulets were believed to protect the wearer and bring good luck. The shape of the symbol gave the amulets different protective powers.
- This activity encourages the students to examine the different shapes of amulets and their associated symbolism.

### **Gallery activity: Personal adornment**

- The Egyptians wore clothing that suited their lifestyle and the climate of Egypt. Personal adornment was decorative, indicated wealth and could be symbolic.
- This activity enables the students to explore examples of personal adornment through visual examination of objects.

## Containers

- Look at the containers in cases 11 and 12. They are made from different materials.
- Find a container made out of each of the materials below and then draw the container. Write down what you think each one could have been used for.

Material	Your drawing	Could be used for
limestone (a white coloured stone)		
copper (a type of metal, the surface of copper often goes green over time)		
red breccia (a type of stone which is red and white in colour)		
clay		
calcite (a type of mineral which is creamy white in colour)		

- Look in the cases again and see if you can find any pots made out of other materials. Can you spot a pot with a gold lid?

## Everyday objects

- Look at the objects in case 11. These objects were placed in tombs to be used in the afterlife. They show aspects of daily life in ancient Egypt.
- Find an object for each of these activities and tick them.

travelling on the Nile

somewhere to live

brewing beer

farming crops

making bread

food to eat

- Now choose one of the objects you found and draw it in the box below and then complete the sentence underneath.

This object would help with .....

- Now discuss with your group what we use today for each of the activities.

## Gods and goddesses

The Egyptians believed in many different gods and goddesses.

- Find the papyrus below in case 24, it is object 8. It was made for a man called Hunefer. Hunefer (wearing a long white linen robe) is shown in 3 places on the papyrus.
- See if you can spot him. Tick how many times you see him.

 once

 twice

 three times

- Use the information box below to identify the gods and goddesses on the papyrus. Draw a line from their image to their name.

- **Anubis** -the god of embalming and the dead, he has the head of a jackal (wild dog).
- **Osiris** - the god of the dead and the underworld, shown wrapped in linen like a mummy.
- **Isis and Nephthys** – protective goddesses, often shown standing behind Osiris.
- **Thoth** - the god of writing and knowledge, he has the head and beak of an ibis bird.
- **Amut** - a monster of the underworld, part lion and part hippopotamus.
- **Horus** - a god of the sky, shown with the head of a hawk.

 Anubis

 Osiris

 Isis and  
Nephthys

 Thoth

 Amut

 Horus


- Now look at the coffins on display in case 21. Can you spot any of these gods and goddesses on the coffins?

## Good luck amulets

The ancient Egyptians had a number of symbols which they believed brought good luck. These symbols might be painted on to something, made into a 3D object or worn as a good luck charm (an amulet). Each symbol had a special meaning.

- Look on both sides of case 23 for the good luck amulets then draw them in the boxes.

Symbol	Meaning	Description	Your drawing
Eye of Horus (also known as a wedjat)	good health	looks like an eye	
Djed pillar (also known as Osiris's backbone).	stability and endurance	looks like a tower with bars across it at the top	
Ankh	life	looks like a cross with a loop at the top	
Scarab	new life and rebirth	a beetle	

- See if you can spot any of these good luck symbols on the mummy cases in this gallery. Remember the ancient Egyptians wanted good luck in the afterlife as well as in everyday life.

## Personal adornment

Both men and women in ancient Egypt wore jewellery – to look good, to show off their wealth or as protection (good luck amulets). Clothing in ancient Egypt was made from linen- a fabric woven from the flax plant. Evidence about what people wore can be found by looking at objects.



- Go to Room 64 and look in case 14 for this sculpture of a seated couple. They are both wearing wigs.
- What colour are the wigs? .....

- Find somebody else wearing a wig in the sculpture on the wall to your right. Tick here when you have spotted the wig!



- Now go to Room 63 and look in case 6 for the painted cloth at the left hand end made for Isetnefret.
- Can you spot Isetnefret? (She is sitting facing her daughter Tii and her grandson Penpare.)

- Tick each of these items when you have found them

the tassels running down the side of the white dresses

the large hoop earrings Tii (standing) is wearing

the wide necklace Tii (standing) is wearing

the long black wig Tii (standing) is wearing

the linen mummy wrapping cloths above and below Isetnefret's cloth


- Now look at the mummy cases in the nearby cases. Can you see any examples of the jewellery or clothing that you have looked at already?



## **After your visit**

## Follow-up activities: introduction

These activities aim to encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken in the ancient Egyptian galleries during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, a drama presentation or an artwork.

## Follow-up activity: Containers

Curriculum links: history, science

- Discuss the containers the students saw when they visited the galleries, drawing on their gallery activity sheet. What were these containers used for? (storage, carrying, serving, protecting.) Make a chart of different containers and what they were used for – don't forget coffins as containers to protect your mummified body!
- Make a list of the materials that containers were made out of in ancient Egypt. Discuss whether the purpose of the container has a bearing on the material used. For example, small calcite stone jars could be used to store perfume because stone keeps cooler and therefore the perfume keeps longer.
- Invite the students to think about what survives. For example, in the case of a jar used to store grain why does the pottery jar survive but not the grain? How might an archaeologist work out that it was used to store grain?

## **Follow-up activity: Everyday objects**

Curriculum links: history

- Remind the students of the objects they saw depicting activities from everyday life in ancient Egypt.
- Discuss the reasons why the ancient Egyptians lived by the river Nile and not in the desert area. Make a list of the advantages of living by the Nile as opposed to living in the desert. Ask the students how the river supported the activities they saw depicted in the gallery.
- An extension activity could discuss modern Egypt and the technology that enables people to live in the desert today.

## **Follow-up activity: Gods and goddesses**

Curriculum links: history, RE

- Make a list of deities the students recall from the Museum visit and previous classroom work. Discuss the role and appearance of each god or goddess.
- Create a wall display of Egyptian gods and goddesses with a picture and short description for each deity.
- Alternatively, students could create their own mini book of Egyptian deities containing 5 key deities from the Egyptian pantheon. A good supporting resource is The British Museum Pocket Dictionary of Ancient Egyptian Gods and Goddesses listed in the background information section of this pack.

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### **Follow-up activity: Good luck amulets**

Curriculum links: history, RE, Art and design

- Discuss the amulets that the students saw during their visit to the gallery. Do they remember the symbols, the names and the meanings?
- Ask the students to work in groups to research amulets and their symbolic shapes. Make a list of the symbols and their associated meanings.
- Research the use of good luck charms in different periods and areas. For example, the Christian St Christopher medals worn to protect travellers. Ask students to design their own charm. What symbol will they use? Does the symbol protect the wearer, provide them with luck or give them good fortune?

### **Follow-up activity: Personal adornment**

Curriculum links: history

- Discuss the evidence for personal adornment in ancient Egypt as seen in the galleries. Print out a suitable image from the British Museum website and ask students to annotate the personal adornment features they are now able to identify in the image.
- Draw a large outline picture of a person. Ask the students to clothe and decorate the outline by adding adornment in the appropriate places. Students can be provided with a list of things to add or can decide themselves and research examples.
- Research adornment through the ages, picking either a particular type of decoration or clothing or limiting the research to one geographical area or time period. Compare decorative styles, utility of designs, materials used etc.