

101 Amazing Facts About

ANCIENT EGYPT



Jack Goldstein

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**101 AMAZING FACTS
ABOUT ANCIENT EGYPT**

Jack Goldstein

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Introduction

Do you know who the ancient Egyptian god of the underworld is? What type of mask would an embalmer wear whilst carrying out the mummification process on a body? Who was the most successful of all the pharaohs? All these questions and more are answered in this fascinating easy-to-read guide to ancient Egypt. Whether you are studying the subject and need access to the important information fast, or you are just interested in this fascinating period of history, this excellent quick-read guide containing over one hundred facts is a perfect addition to your bookshelf.

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General Facts

1. Hieroglyphs, an early form of writing, were invented by the Egyptians in around 3000 BC. It is thought that they were first used as wall paintings with meaning, later going on to become more complex and descriptive - in fact there are more than seven hundred different hieroglyphs!
2. Hieroglyphs were in fact only used for official inscriptions and ritual purposes. For everyday use, a script called 'hieratic' was used.
3. The word hieroglyph is Greek; it comes from the words *hieros* (sacred) and *glyphe* (carving). It was so called because the Greeks found the writings on the walls of temples.
4. The last known hieroglyphic inscription is in the Temple of Isis in Philae, and was inscribed in 394 AD.
5. More than one thousands gods were worshipped by the ancient Egyptians - although the most important of all of them was Ra, the sun god.
6. The ancient Egyptians were the first people whose calendar was divided into 365 days spread over twelve months - although they also had two additional calendars; a lunar one which told priests when to perform ceremonies for the moon god Khonsu, and an astronomical one (based on observing the star Sirius) which let them know when the flood season was approaching.
7. The Egyptians invented clocks - the very first time-telling devices were tall obelisks, whose moving shadows acted as a kind of sundial.

8. The people of ancient Egypt believed that the earth (which they called Geb) and the sky (Nut) was destroyed and then re-created by Ra on a daily basis.
9. Egyptians believed that the world was flat and round, with the river Nile flowing through its middle.
10. Ancient Egyptians were the first people to use gold for trade (although other civilizations had previously used it for jewellery and decoration).



Pyramids

11. Egyptian pyramids are probably the best-known pyramid structures, although other ancient races (such as the Mayans) and even more recent ones (the Aztecs) built them. In Egypt, most were built as tombs for pharaohs and their families.
12. It is thought that the shape of pyramids was inspired by the spreading rays of the sun.
13. We have discovered more than 130 pyramids throughout Egypt, however the vast majority have been targeted by tomb robbers over the last 3,000 years and their goods have been plundered.
14. The Great Pyramid at Giza is perhaps the best known of all of the pyramids. It took twenty years to build, and was constructed for king Khufu who lived between 2589 and 2566 BC.
15. It is made from an amazing two million blocks of limestone, and stands almost 150 metres high - that's taller even than the statue of Liberty! For 3800 years after its construction it was the tallest man-made structure in the world.
16. It has vents pointing up towards the constellation of Orion; these were put there so the occupant's spirit could fly straight up to the gods.
17. The earliest pharaohs would be buried with their servants, who would of course *not necessarily die of natural causes at the same time...* later tombs contain model servants (called *shabti*) instead.

18. The very first Egyptian pyramid was built in 2600BC by architect Imhotep for the pharaoh Djoser. It was a step pyramid and was originally surrounded by a wall ten metres high which had fifteen doors in it - although only one of them opened!
19. Some ancient Egyptian tombs even contained toilets!
20. Pyramid builders were in fact not slaves, but skilled craftsmen in the permanent employment of the pharaohs. We have even found graffiti which shows they took pride in their work, and were organised into teams with names such as 'Friends of Khufu' and 'Drunkards of Menkaure'!



A Step Pyramid

Did You Know?

21. In ancient Egypt, it was fashionable to hold a fly swatter made from a giraffe's tail!
22. Both men and women wore eye make-up, which they believed could fight eye infections and help restore poor eyesight. It was made from ground-up powders mixed with oil and was called *kohl*.
23. The scarab beetle was sacred to the Egyptians, representing life after death.
24. Both sexes also shaved their heads and wore wigs; this was to stop them getting lice. Whereas rich people would wear wigs made from real human hair, poorer people would make their own from wool or vegetable fibre!
25. Ancient Egypt was not called Egypt! Throughout the period it had a number of different names, including *Kemet* (meaning 'Black Land', a reference to the colour of the rich soil in the Nile Valley), *Deshret* ('Red Land', referring to the area's vast deserts), and later in its history *Hwt-ka-Ptah* ('House of the Ka of Ptah', referring to the god Ptah). It wasn't until the time of the ancient Greeks that the name was changed to *Aegyptus*.
26. A pharaoh would never let his hair (or shaved head) be seen. He would always wear a headdress called a *nemes* - you can see this striped headdress on Tutankhamen's golden death mask.

27. Doctors of the period were the first people to sew wounds shut. They would keep their surgical needles in cases made from hollowed-out bird bones.
28. Some scholars believe that the ancient Egyptian ankh symbol later evolved to the Christian cross. To the ancient Egyptians, the ankh was the key to eternal life.
29. The giant Sphinx which guards the three pyramids of Giza is believed to represent the pharaoh Khafre, son of Khufu. In 1378 an Islamic cleric called Sai'im al-dahr was hanged for vandalism after he damaged it - although we do not know for sure if it was during this incident that the monument lost its nose.
30. The Great Pyramid of Giza is so well constructed that the four sides of the base are equal to an accuracy of just fifteen millimetres, an absolutely astounding feat of engineering.



Tutankhamun's Death Mask

Pharaohs

31. Pharaohs were the kings and queens of Egypt. The word *pharaoh* means 'great house', as people believed that the king's human body was home to a god. However, the word itself is Greek in origin; the ancient Egyptians didn't actually use the term.
32. It was believed that each pharaoh was host the god Horus, son of Ra the sun god. When the pharaoh died, he was reunited with the sun temporarily, before returning to earth in a new body.
33. The earliest pharaohs would marry every single royal princess, ensuring that no-one else could marry them... thus eliminating the possibility a young rival to the throne would be born!
34. The first pharaoh was King Menes; he united the Upper and Lower kingdoms of ancient Egypt into one land, which he called Memphis (which actually means 'balance of two lands'). He ruled the new land for sixty years - until he was killed by a hippopotamus!
35. The pharaoh who had the longest reign in history was Pepi II, who held the position from 2246 BC when he was just six years old until 2152 BC - an amazing 94 years!
36. Pepi II was incredibly excited when news reached him of his men discovering a pygmy on an expedition. He set out on a journey to see the man, ordering him to be guarded at all time so he wouldn't run away. He even requested that the pygmy be inspected ten times a night until he arrived!

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37. There were three female pharaohs of ancient Egypt; the greatest of these was Hatshepsut, who reigned from 1498 BC to 1483 BC.
 38. One of the most successful pharaohs with regards to his military campaigns was Thutmose III. He conquered all of Egypt's enemies - although at one point during his campaigns was nearly trampled to death by a herd of wild elephants.
 39. King Tutankhamun was nine years old when he became pharaoh, and died when he was just eighteen. Because his reign was short, his tomb was small compared to others, meaning it was overlooked for thousands of years, until it was discovered in 1922 by Howard Carter.
 40. The last pharaoh was Cleopatra, a woman of Greek descent who ascended to the throne at the age of 17, ruling until she was 39. She killed herself when she was captured by a Roman army led by Octavian. In doing so, she brought the end of one of the most fascinating eras in history.



Horus at Philae Temple

Egyptian Society

41. The ancient Egyptians loved board games, including *Mehen*, *Dogs and Jackals* and *Senet*, which was played on a long board painted with 30 squares. Paintings survive to this day showing figures such as Queen Nefertari playing Senet, and Tutankhamen even had a Senet board buried with him in his tomb.
42. Egyptians kept a huge variety of animals as pets. They were of course particularly fond of cats, associated as they were with the goddess Bastet. However, police officers of the age were assisted by both dogs and trained monkeys, and some households kept hawks, ibises, baboons and even lions!
43. It was believed that the best cure for toothache was to eat fried mice!
44. In most ancient civilizations, women had very few rights and privileges. However it was different in Egypt. Not only could they own property, request a divorce and carry out business deals, but also some women (generally those from wealthy families) could become doctors or priestesses.
45. Ancient Egyptians revered cats so highly that if someone killed one, they were usually sentenced to death.
46. When a cat died, the owner's entire family would shave their eyebrows as a sign of mourning.
47. When the Greeks made contact with the Egyptians, they were amazed to discover that all children were considered a blessing and a gift from the gods; in Greek culture, unwanted children - especially girls - were left outdoors to die!

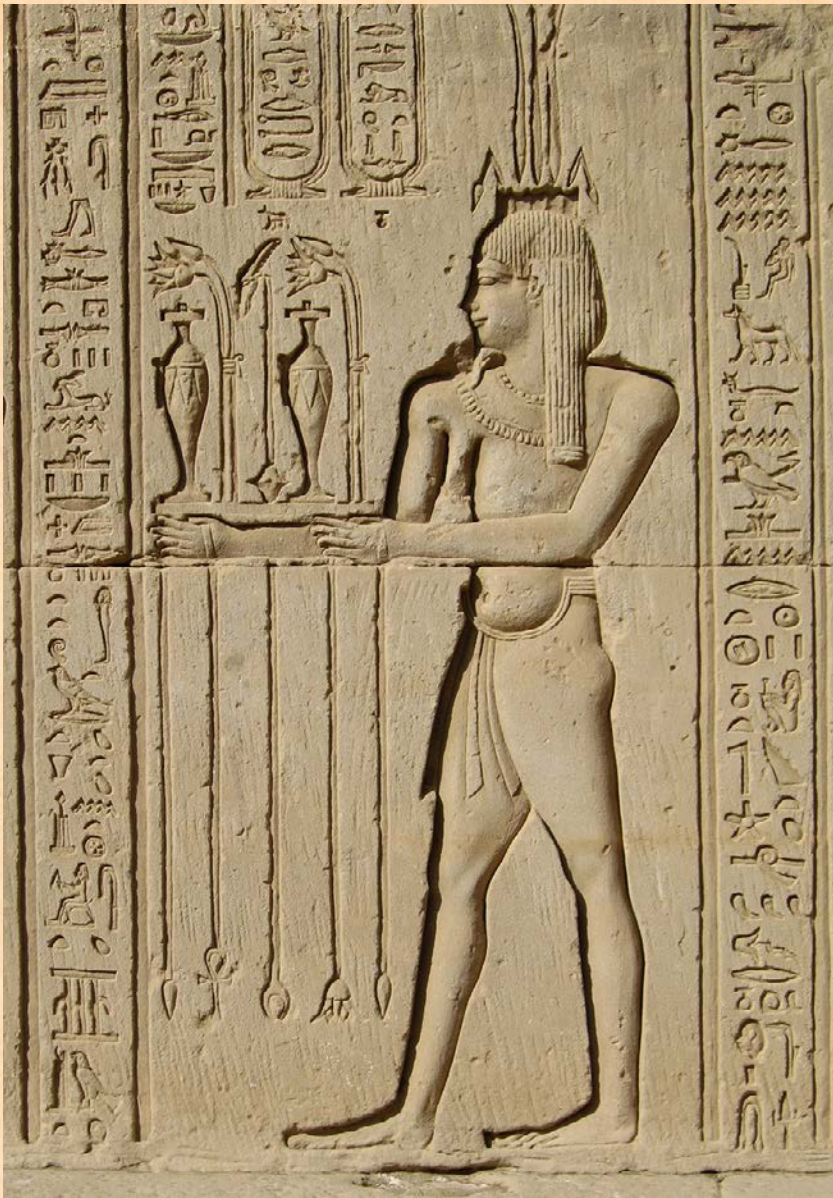
48. If a baker from ancient Egypt was caught cheating a customer out of the volume of bread they bought, they could have their ear cut off and nailed to their door!
49. Honey was a popular foodstuff in ancient Egypt, particularly because it does not spoil - even in the intense heat of the desert. Amazingly, archaeologists have found honey in tombs of pharaohs which is still edible today (and yes, they did taste it!)
50. Just as some people today consider Friday the 13th unlucky, there were certain days in ancient Egypt that were believed to be unlucky to travel on or harvest. Interestingly, these were based on real experience, for instance the days around the time of the annual flooding of the Nile were dangerous because (in addition to the danger of drowning) there was a large increase in the number of flies and other insects which could bite and cause infections, illness and death.



Statue of a Jackal

Pharaoh Ramses II

51. Ramses II is considered the greatest pharaoh from all of ancient Egypt's history.
52. His father was pharaoh Sethi I and his mother was Queen Tuya.
53. He was named after his grandfather, Ramses I.
54. He ruled Egypt for sixty years, from 1279 BC until 1212 BC.
55. Ramses II was the only pharaoh to carry the title *The Great* after his name.
56. He had red hair - a trait considered lucky and powerful as it was associated with the god Seth.
57. Ramses II had an amazing ninety children; fifty-six boys and forty-four girls!
58. He had eight 'official' wives, along with over one hundred concubines.
59. Ramses II fought the battle of Kadesh against the Hittites. This is the oldest recorded battle in History, and despite Ramses only having 20,000 men against his opponent's army of over 50,000 the battle was a stalemate - which was in fact seen as a huge success by the Egyptian people.
60. An alternative name for Ramses II is Ozymandias, which is a Greek translation of his throne name.



A Relief from the Temple of Hathor

Mummies

61. The ancient Egyptians believed that mummification ensured a safe passage into the afterlife.
62. When transforming a body into a mummy, a priest would usually wear the jackal-headed mask of the god Anubis. He was the god of death, and was particularly associated with jackals as they would uncover bodies in ancient Egyptian cemeteries and eat them!
63. It was not just people that were mummified - it was common to carry out the procedure on animals as well. Sometimes these were pets, however in one case archaeologists have found a mummified crocodile more than four metres long!
64. Osiris was the very first mummy, according to ancient Egyptian belief. He was murdered by Seth, but after being wrapped in bandages by Isis he came back to life and became god of the afterlife.
65. Because the ancient Egyptians considered any cut to be an offense on the body, in a symbolic ceremony, the embalmer who made the first cut of the mummification process was known as 'the ripper' and would have stones thrown at him by his colleagues before being chased away and cursed!
66. Internal organs were stored in canopic jars, with each jar representing a different god. The brain was pulled out through the nose, using a hooked instrument. Only the heart was left in the body, as the Egyptians believed it was the seat of the soul.

67. The eyes of a body were also removed, however replacement false eyes were often made using onions!
68. Egyptians called the tent where mummification took place 'The Beautiful House'.
69. Strangely, as recently as 150 years ago, both Europeans and Americans believed that mummies had great healing powers, and would grind up their bodies into powder, using it as medicine. Even King Charles II would rub mummy dust onto his skin, thinking greatness would rub off on him. How horrible!
70. Ramses II had a distinctive hook-shaped nose. When he was being mummified, embalmers stuffed his nostrils with peppercorns so his nose would retain its shape.



The Sphinx

Some Unusual Facts

71. Because the diet of a pharaoh (beer, wine, bread and honey) was very high in sugar, many did not reflect the depiction of them in paintings. Whilst you may think of them as slender, they were often extremely overweight and suffered from diabetes. Queen Hatshepsut, despite being portrayed on her sarcophagus as slender and athletic, is now thought to have been very fat and balding!
72. We believe it was the ancient Egyptians who first used engagement rings, which were used to symbolize a never-ending cycle of love.
73. The ancient Egyptians loved their beer! Models of brewers have even been found in tombs, ensuring the occupant had plenty of booze in the afterlife!
74. Egyptians who could write were believed to have been given the power by the gods. Before writing anything down, a scribe would pour out some water mixed with ink as an offering to Thoth, the messenger of the gods.
75. Although in the later years of ancient Egypt wine had become popular amongst the upper classes, the early kings would not drink it as it reminded them of blood spilled in battle. They also believed that being drunk happened because they were filled with the blood of their ancestors!
76. The ancient Egyptians believed that they were made by the river god Khnum, who would fashion them from clay on a potter's wheel.

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77. Hippos were considered even more dangerous than crocodiles as they would often capsize boats travelling the river Nile. They were associated with the evil god Seth.
 78. Generally, Egyptian children wore no clothes at all until they reached their teenage years!
 79. Originally, the walls of the pyramids were covered with a bright white limestone, however we can no longer see them as they were built because this layer has eroded away.
 80. The ancient Egyptians had an amazingly accurate pregnancy test which also predicted the sex of a baby on the majority of occasions it was used! The woman would urinate on wheat and barley seeds over the course of a few days. If the barley grew she was pregnant with a male child; if the wheat grew it would be a girl. If neither grew then the woman was not pregnant. Although scientists originally laughed at the idea, it has since been tested and proven accurate 70% of the time!



An Egyptian Ankh

Gods

81. **Ra**, the god of the sun - the lord of all the gods, usually depicted as a human with the head of a falcon, crowned with a sun disc encircled by a sacred cobra.
82. **Anubis**, the god of the afterlife - he guided the dead to the next life via the Underworld court of Osiris and was depicted as a man with the head of a jackal.
83. **Bastet**, the goddess of protection - depicted as a woman with the head of a cat, she was one of the daughters of the sun god Ra.
84. **Geb**, the god of the earth - depicted either as a man lying below the arch of the sky goddess Nut or a man with a goose on his head, it was thought that earthquakes were Geb's laughter.
85. **Horus**, the god of the sky - a man with the head of a hawk (or sometimes shown as a hawk itself), it was believed that the pharaoh was the living Horus.
86. **Hathor**, goddess of love and joy - often depicted as a woman with the ears of a cow, she was the wife of Horus and was connected with foreign places and materials.
87. **Osiris**, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld - a mummified man wearing a white, cone-like headdress adorned with feathers, it was believed that Osiris gave the Egyptians the gift of barley, one of their most important crops.

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