3 Study of the Material World of Ancient Egypt

This glimpse into the old world teaches us much. . . . The progress of civilization, the inventions of mankind have changed but little.

ADOLF ERMAN

The study of ancient Egypt and ancient Egyptian culture has most often concentrated on the language, history, religion, and prominent monuments. Certainly attention has been paid to the activities of the Egyptians and the objects and processes that made them possible, but not to the same degree. With some rare exceptions archaeologists and historians did not always treat the ordinary tools and utensils with the consideration they deserved. To properly understand the material world in which the Egyptians lived and worked, the emphasis has to be redirected to a certain extent to remedy this. Still, there are bits and pieces of information embedded in histories and narratives that bear reexamination.

It is only natural that those things that made the ancient Egyptians seem different or unusual should command the most attention – pyramids and mummies being the most familiar examples. From the Greek and Roman authors and travelers to the present day, the emphasis, when examining and discussing Egypt, has been to a great extent on the spectacular, the unusual, and the mysterious. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, went to lengths to describe the country, its geography, and its history as he understood it. He also concerned himself with Egyptian religion and the gods and how they related to the customs and beliefs of the Greeks, but when he came to a discussion of activities and customs, he stressed differences, in part to emphasize some similarities.

To understand the descriptions of the land of Egypt and Egyptian customs found in Herodotus' *Histories* it is important to remember that everything cannot be taken literally and that his emphasis of differences was for a kind of literary effect. He tells us that the Egyptians shun the use of Greek customs, as well as the customs of any other peoples, and that their customs and laws are for the most part different from those of all other men. He gives some detailed examples.

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According to Herodotus Egyptian women buy and sell in the market and men stay home and weave. Men carry loads on their head, women on their shoulders. Egyptian priests shave their heads while elsewhere priests have their hair long. A number of other examples continue to emphasize the unique character of the Egyptians. Taking into consideration his desire to underline the differences and the fact that he wrote in the time of the Persian occupation near the end of Egypt's greatness, some of his observations are probably correct, but many call for skepticism and a critical examination.

One instance in which Herodotus does give an insightful description is in that of the craft of boatbuilding. He described that the planks were laid like courses of bricks, with the joints alternating, and that the boats had no ribs. In examination of preserved boats, these details seem to be correct (II, 96).

However useful Herodotus and most of the other ancient authors are in regard to descriptions of the monuments and other aspects of the country in their time, they have left little useful and reliable information about everyday activities and materials. It is not until almost the beginning of the nineteenth century that a serious interest in the minutia of everyday activity began to take hold. In the intervening centuries there were a number of European travelers who voyaged to Egypt, marveled at the ancient monuments, and often wrote memoirs of their experience. After 1516, when Egypt was conquered by the Ottoman Turks, it became certainly easier and safer for foreigners to visit the country, so the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries saw a number of distinguished persons who made the trip.

The widespread interest of early travelers and their countries of origin can be illustrated by a small sampling that includes the Swiss Felix Fabri in 1483, the Frenchman Pierre Belon in 1547, and the Englishman George Sandys in 1611. In the beginning of the seventeenth century the study of the pyramids was advanced by Pietro delle Valle, an Italian nobleman, who described them as they were in 1615, but it was up to an English astronomer and mathematician named John Greaves to do the most accurate survey of those monuments that had been accomplished to his time. Greaves traveled to Egypt in 1639 and published his study of the pyramids in 1646, a work surpassing in observation and accuracy anything on the subject previously attempted. In 1738–39 the separate expeditions of two travelers, Frederick Norden, a Danish naval officer, and Richard Pococke, an English clergyman, crossed paths on the Nile. They both left lively accounts of their travels that, when taken together,

provide an extensive series of descriptions of the monuments, customs, and life of the people they encountered. Norden left one of the earliest accurate images of the Great Sphinx; Pococke made the first attempt at a map of the Valley of the Kings at Thebes.

As interesting as many of the descriptions and accounts left by these travelers and others who visited Egypt may be, there was very little possibility for such visitors to know or understand the rudiments of the life of the ancient Egyptians. The illustrations of the monuments included in their publications range from accurate renderings to almost imaginary concoctions. Even so, they can still serve in many cases to depict the condition of the remains and the sites as they were in their own day.

In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt with a French expeditionary force numbering about 45,000 under his command. What made the French expedition so important to the further study of ancient Egypt was that Napoleon added a large group of scholars, artists, and engineers to his military force. They were given the tasks of studying and mapping the country; they recorded not only the flora and fauna and aspects of agricultural and domestic activity of their time, but they paid great attention to the ancient monuments as well.

The Description of Egypt, the mammoth multivolume publication eventually produced by this expeditionary group, was the most thorough study of a non-European country attempted to that time. It was divided into three sections, Antiquity, Natural History, and The Modern State. The Egyptian campaign left such a lasting influence on the study of the ancient civilization that it has been called "the birth of Egyptology." The drawings and engravings of the monuments made by the French are often the only accurate renderings of structures that have since been damaged and in some cases even totally destroyed, but the illustrations in the section on antiquity were mainly concerned with what were considered major monuments. There were, in addition, plates that illustrated statues and small objects such as amulets, scarabs, and texts on papyrus, but the great majority of the illustrations were architectural renderings of temples and tombs.

An important source of information about ancient Egypt comes from the representations in the tombs of the elite classes, where many of the activities of the estate and the field are illustrated. In the *Description* only a limited number of such tombs were sampled and the record of such scenes is consequently small. Some vignettes

of farming activities, such as plowing, sowing, and reaping, are included, with a small number of examples of tools and clothing. Processing and storage of the grain is also shown. Examples of musicians and their instruments, papyrus boatbuilding, and some other areas of food preparation are also recorded, but almost all of these are shown as if they were isolated designs and not parts of elaborately decorated tomb walls. The French expedition's emphasis on what they considered major monuments can be demonstrated by the fact that many of the examples of tomb painting used in the publication came from the tombs at El Kab in the south and Beni Hasan in Middle Egypt, both in areas where there were few significant examples of standing stone architecture and the French artists had the time to turn their attention to the study of the tomb paintings. It was not until the early nineteenth century that the paintings and reliefs in many tombs would be found, examined, and recorded in detail.

The immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic campaign ushered in a period of systematic collecting of antiquities on a large scale. The developing museums of Europe in London, Paris, Rome, and Turin, in northern Italy, all benefited from the ease with which their representatives were able to procure ancient objects to furnish their collections. The government of Mohammad Ali (1769–1849) allowed representatives of foreign nations to excavate and collect almost without restriction.

Notable among the agents employed by Henry Salt, the English consul, was an Italian expatriate named Giovanni Belzoni who worked in Egypt from 1815 to 1819 (Fig. 12). He was an able engineer who became a specialist in the transportation of monumental sculpture. He was also, in some respects, a pioneer archaeologist. From Belzoni's memoirs it seems clear that he understood the rudiments of stratigraphy and its use in establishing the sequence of remains and artifacts in an excavation. He also understood that the artifacts he discovered could begin to reveal much about the life of the ancients.

> The Egyptians were certainly well acquainted with linen manufacture to a perfection equal to our own; for in many of their figures, we observe their garments quite transparent; and among the folding of the mummies, I observed some cloth quite as fine as our common muslin, quite strong, and of an even texture. They had the art of tanning leather, with which they made shoes as well as we do, some of which

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FIGURE 12 **Giovanni Belzoni, an early excavator and treasure hunter.**
Belzoni saw that the objects he found could provide information about life in antiquity. Much reviled as a vandal who opened tombs with a battering ram, Belzoni excavated, preserved, and recorded what he found.

> I found of various shapes. They also had the art of staining the leather with various colours, as we do Morocco, and actually knew the mode of embossing on it, for I found leather with figures impressed on it, quite elevated. I think it must have been done with a hot iron while the leather was wet. (Belzoni, pp. 269–270)

Belzoni further observed the following:

> In all my researches I found only one arrow, two feet long. At one extremity it had a copper point well fixed in, and at the other a notch as usual to receive the string of the bow: it had been evidently split by the string, and glued together again. (Belzoni, p. 268)

Although Belzoni was principally interested in acquiring important sculpture for his employer (and for himself) he exhibited a remarkable

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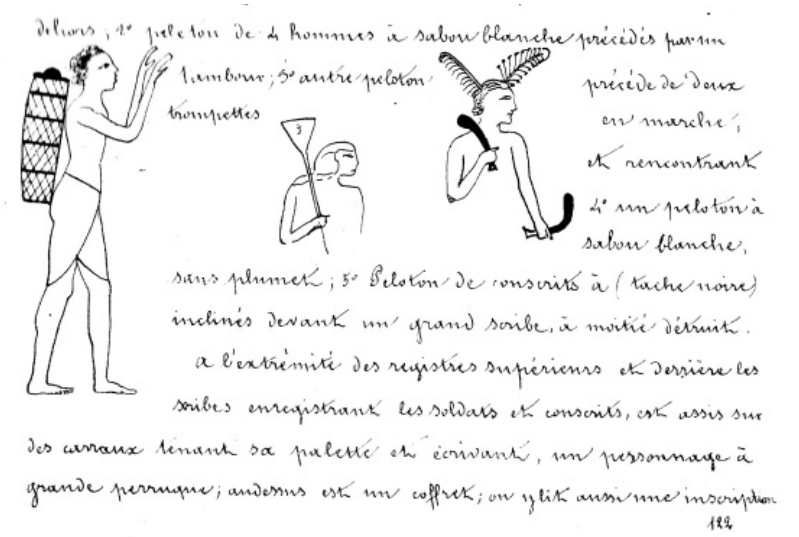

FIGURE 13 **Page detail from J. F. Champollion's *Monuments de'Égypte et de la Nubie: notices descriptive* (1835–47).**
This detail illustrates a military drummer and trumpeter, copied from a tomb painting. Champollion, on his expedition to Egypt, not only copied inscriptions but noted interesting details such as these.

degree of insight in interpreting the useful objects of antiquity that he happened on. He is often characterized as a looter who opened tombs with a battering ram, and some of his methods would not always be approved today. However, his understanding of what he found far exceeded that of most of his contemporaries.

In 1828–29 Ippolito Rosellini and Jean François Champollion, the decipherer of hieroglyphs, led a joint French-Tuscan mission to Egypt. The members of the group had the advantage of being the first researchers who could certainly read the ancient language, recognize the names of kings, and establish some sense of a historical chronology. Unlike the scholars and artists who were a part of the Napoleonic campaign that preceded them, this group had a more focused purpose, which was to concentrate on the antiquities and to make more accurate plans and renderings of what they saw. Also unlike their predecessors, and because they were not part of an invading army, they could travel at their own pace and had more time to devote to their aim of accuracy and to the examination of the decoration of private tombs, which illustrated various activities (Figs. 13, 14).

Rosellini and Champollion worked separately, each with his own crew of artists and draftsmen, but they conferred and collaborated, so the results show evidence of a joint effort. The publications of

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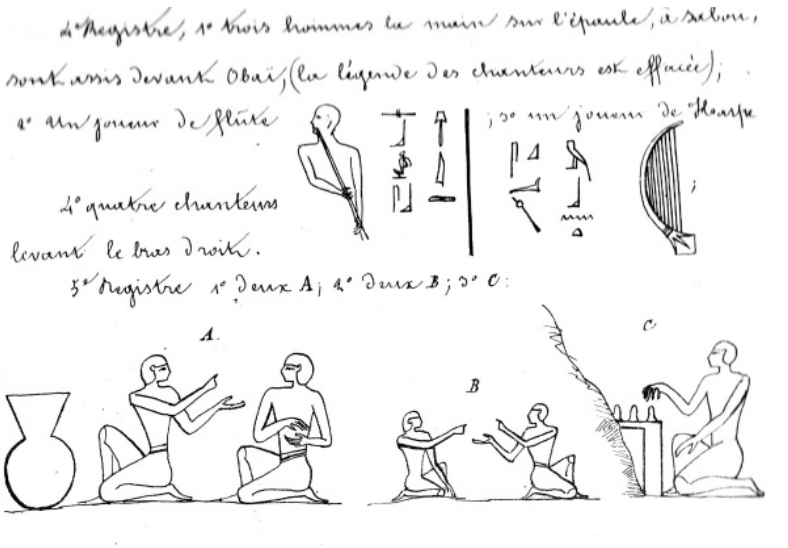

FIGURE 14 Page detail from J. F. Champollion's *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie: notices descriptive* (1835–47).
This illustration includes musicians, instruments, and singers.

the two scholars set an early standard for accuracy and completeness and became an inspiration for those who came after them. In the process they provided much more visual information about how the ancient Egyptians depicted agriculture, aspects of manufacture, and many other parts of life, from warfare to games. How they differed was in a basic approach to the recording of tomb decoration. Where Champollion recorded the reliefs and paintings as complete tableaus, illustrating the layout and arrangements of tomb walls, Rosellini gathered illustrations of specific aspects of ancient culture he had extracted from the representations on the walls of many different tombs. As an example, he took the subject "birds of ancient Egypt" and grouped all the different species that he and his artists had observed in many locations. In the same way he put together many different images depicting a craft, such as woodworking or weaving, regardless of the specific place of origin or the period in which the images were created, better explaining how each activity was carried out because of the varied sources and depictions. As a result, Rosellini can be considered one of the first scholar-explorers to be especially concerned with recording and explaining the material world of the ancients and not just the monumental remains of Egypt. He was also the first to use color in his publication of tomb paintings.

Both Rosellini and Champollion and their artists and draftsmen produced hundreds of drawings and collected hundreds of objects to

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the benefit of mainly the Archaeological Museum in Florence and the Louvre Museum in Paris. The two multivolume publications that were eventually produced recorded their extensive travels in Egypt and Nubia and provided new and accurate information for the generations of scholars who followed them.

Inspired by the work of his two predecessors and their publications, which were just beginning to appear, Karl Richard Lepsius led a Prussian expedition to Egypt in 1842–45 to continue the study and recording of the monuments. He was better funded, better equipped, and had a larger staff than the two earlier scholars. The drawings and plans produced by the group were clearly more accurate as a result. The plates in the twelve volumes of his *Monuments of Egypt and Ethiopia* still provide scholars a reliable reference to the temples and tombs and their decoration that exceeds the work of those that had gone before, especially in the area of tomb paintings that depict everyday activity.

Lepsius and his group managed to collect about 15,000 objects and plaster casts, a scholarly treasure trove that provided the nucleus of the Berlin Museum collection, where he later became the keeper of the Egyptian section. This was not an accumulation of works of art only but included a wide variety of artifacts (pottery, furniture, tools, and weapons) that illustrate ordinary activities. Lepsius is considered the founder of German Egyptology, as are Rosellini for Italy and Champollion for France. Each of them contributed greatly to the study and understanding of life in ancient Egypt that goes beyond royal monuments and temples, and each provided, in their time, new and revealing information about the land, the people, and their activities.

Considering all the accomplishments of his three distinguished contemporaries, Sir John Gardner Wilkinson stands out as an explorer working alone. An Englishman who had once considered the navy and the clergy as career choices, he was influenced by the antiquarian Sir William Gell to study ancient Egypt and eventually he decided to investigate the country and monuments for himself. He lived and traveled in Egypt for twelve years (1821–33) with other later visits. Wilkinson, unlike the leaders of the three great expeditions, was not funded by any government or scientific society. He had contacts with the main developments in scholarship of the time through Gell, but he was self-driven to study the antiquities in all of their aspects.

Wilkinson spent most of his time in Thebes among the tombs on the west bank, and it was from his familiarity with the tomb

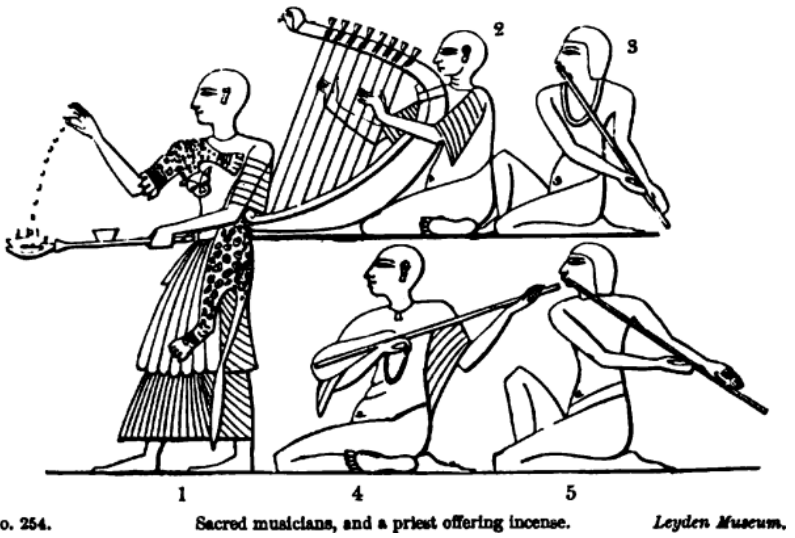

FIGURE 15 **A page from Sir John Gardner Wilkinson's** *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* **(1837).**
Wilkinson used tomb paintings to explain his subject. His drawings have proved to be generally accurate and continue to provide information about activities and customs.

decoration and the actual objects then being excavated that he derived knowledge of aspects of the ancients that had not been considered by other explorers in the same depth. The eventual result was a revolutionary publication that introduced a new way to study ancient life. Wilkinson's *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1837) (Fig. 15) was the first concerted attempt to go beyond temples and tombs, kings and mummies. The subtitle of the work tells it all: *Including Their Private Life, Government, Laws, Arts, Manufactures, Religion, Agriculture, and Early History, derived from a comparison of the painting, sculptures, and monuments still existing, with the accounts of the ancient authors.* Wilkinson's work was very popular in its time and went through a number of later editions. His discussion of a banquet illustrates how he attempted to make the Egyptians come alive to the reader:

> A circumstance of this kind is represented in a tomb at Thebes. A party, assembled at the house of a friend, are regaled with the sound of music, and the customary introduction of refreshments; and no attention which the host could show his visitors appears to be neglected on the occasion. The wine has circulated freely … (Wilkinson, 1878 ed., vol. 2, p. 20)

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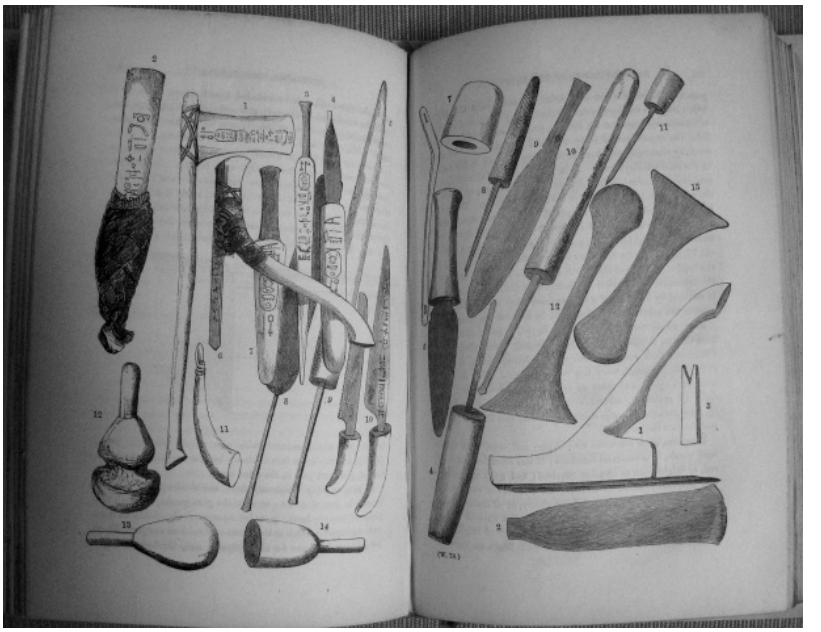

FIGURE 16 **Pages from Sir John Gardner Wilkinson's *The Egyptians in the Time of the Pharaohs* (1857).**
These are ancient objects that Wilkinson saw, examined, or collected. He was one of the early enthusiasts of ancient Egyptian life who studied ordinary objects and artifacts in detail.
Author's photograph

This was no longer a concentration on only dynasties, successions of rulers, battles, and conquests, but a vivid reconstruction of what life and customs among the Egyptians may have been. It was to set a pattern for many later works with similar emphasis (Fig. 16).

As the European interest in ancient Egypt grew, other scholars took Wilkinson's lead in the discussion of aspects of life in ancient Egypt. Notable among them was Adolf Erman, a distinguished German scholar, professor, and museum professional. His *Life in Ancient Egypt* was published in 1885 and translated into English in 1895. It is still in print and has served generations as an introduction to the general culture of ancient Egypt, as well as vividly illustrating aspects of daily life. As scholarly research and publication provided new information, and as modern means of communication developed, many more authors followed the lead of Wilkinson and Erman. A casual search on the Internet will currently yield around fifteen or twenty works with the title *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt* or something very similar.

The archaeological basis for the study of the material world of Egypt was also becoming more focused in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Alexander Rhind, a Scot, excavated in Thebes in the 1850s, well ahead of others of the period. He recognized that context and associations of finds and stratigraphy in an excavation were meaningful and important. His interesting collection of artifacts is in the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh. But it was an Englishman, William Matthew Flinders Petrie, who revolutionized the developing discipline of Egyptology. Trained as a surveyor, Petrie as a young man had been a keen student of British archaeology. To prove or disprove a prophetic theory about the Great Pyramid at Giza, he went to Egypt in 1880 to do an accurate survey of the monument.

Petrie almost immediately developed an interest in the monuments and history of the country, and although mainly self-taught, he stayed on to excavate in Egypt and Palestine for more than sixty years. The last quarter of the nineteenth century was a period of intense development in the physical sciences, which certainly must have had some influence on Petrie's attitudes and his methods of work. He is usually credited with being the single innovator in the history of archaeology who saw the importance of detailed recording and careful preservation of the "ordinary" objects from excavations. Certainly he was convinced that the true study of antiquity was not only about statues and inscriptions, and that attention to the objects and materials ordinarily discarded by other excavators might yield a more complete picture of ancient culture and society. He was to pass this concern on to generations of Egyptologists and excavators, beginning with his many students and assistants.

Petrie's interests were almost encyclopedic. Metrology, the study of weights and measures, had an early and long-lasting fascination for him; the similarity of symbols and decorative devices in different cultures was another. In addition to his regular publication of his excavations (a practice not yet carried on by many of his contemporaries), he published by type many of the objects he had excavated or collected. The monographs written by Petrie included specialized works on objects of daily use, tools and weapons, slate palettes, Predynastic pottery, scarabs and seals, and funerary furniture, among other topics. He analyzed the material, charted stylistic differences, called attention to unusual features, and treated objects with the scholarly care that would produce a deeper understanding of the Egyptians.

Petrie made a practice of dividing objects from his excavations with supporting museums around the world. This insured that

the ordinary objects he valued as significant evidence of Egyptian history would be exposed to a much wider public. A large part of his collections were left to what is now the Petrie Museum, University College, London, where they form one of the most extensive resources on ancient Egypt and especially on the ways that people lived and worked. His influence on the practice of excavation was profound. Not only did he teach others to observe and record, but he trained Egyptian workmen whose descendants are still carrying on the select occupation of archaeological excavation to this day. After Petrie the process of uncovering ancient remains was changed forever, and the knowledge of antiquity in its many aspects was expanded to include a greater sense of how people lived and acted.

From Napoleon's expedition at the end of the eighteenth century to Petrie's time, the explorers and scholars of ancient Egypt, its monuments, and its artifacts had become more attuned to the possibilities of knowing and understanding the material world of the ancient Egyptians. In 1982 the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, organized an important exhibition titled *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom, 1558–1085 BC*. This was an unusual attempt to document the lifestyles of Egypt in a particular period. Although it did not attempt a complete history of artifacts and objects from all of Egyptian history, it illustrated many of the object types used in everyday living.

Modern developments in the sciences have made many advances in archaeology possible. Today the situation is developing even further; excavation is not a one-man endeavor. Specialists in many different fields collaborate on the study of the material found, and the results can be far more rewarding to science and history. Something as simple as a segment of rope, when examined, can reveal that it was made of papyrus, flax, or grass, or even some other plant material, thus giving an insight into an industry and its adaptability to particular situations. Scientific analysis can determine if some materials are domestic or foreign, making it possible to chart areas of trade and production in the ancient world.

With satellite imaging and the Global Positioning System (GPS), distance sensing, ground radar, and ground receptivity, the discovery of and accurate mapping of sites have become far more accurate. Carbon 14 and thermoluminescent dating techniques (among others) have made it possible to assign more precise time periods to organic materials and to ceramic products, including pottery. The CT (computerized axial tomography) scan procedure has made it

no longer crucial to use invasive and destructive techniques in the investigation of human remains. The electron microscope can produce detailed analysis of the elements contained in a specimen, making it possible to identify materials and their geographical origins more precisely. As a further example, the minute examination of grain, husks, and other plant residue has contributed to the study of ancient ecology and practices of cultivation, as well a better understanding of diet and nutrition.

With all of these scientific applications there is still a significant gradual advancement that has been made in the study of ancient Egypt that may seem obvious today but was slow to be recognized. The details of daily life, either evidenced by actual objects or represented in the visual arts, are important to any attempt to understand the culture of ancient Egypt. For too long the students of Egypt concentrated on unraveling the details of Egyptian history, the complexities of the language, the technical aspects of the architecture, and the stylistic development of the justly important works of art, to the exclusion of what it was that could shed light on the lives of the people. This is gradually being remedied. It is hoped that the following text will help to advance understanding of life and living in ancient Egypt.

It has become obvious in attempting to study the past through archaeology that no clue, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, should be overlooked. A more complete understanding of an ancient civilization is comprised of more than just masterpieces preserved in museum galleries. Our knowledge of life in ancient Egypt and its remains has been conditioned and expanded by almost two hundred years of exploration. Our understanding of the artifacts, texts, and inscriptions has been subjected to constant clarification and revision by ongoing scholarly study, which continues today. As a result of all of these efforts, it is possible at the beginning of the twenty-first century to sketch a picture of the material world of ancient Egypt as never before.

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