

Egyptology

Egyptology is the study of pharonic Egypt from the fifth millennium BCE to 641 CE. It is based upon archeological and written materials that have remained well preserved thanks to Egypt's arid climate. After the invasion of Egypt by Alexander the Great (332 BCE), and, later, the Roman Empire (31 BCE), knowledge about ancient Egypt was gradually lost as Hellenistic elements spread throughout Egyptian culture. Ancient Egyptian religion and hieroglyphics, however, were preserved in Egyptian temples under Roman rule. The introduction of Christianity in the early first century CE further eroded elements of ancient Egyptian culture. However, memories of Egypt's glories remained alive in a number of ways, including through the works of Classical writers such as Herodotus (c. 484-425 BCE); the Romans' worship of the Egyptian gods Osiris and Isis; and the king's list, which was compiled in Greek by the Egyptian scholar Manetho (3rd century BCE).¹ Coptic Christians also continued to use the ancient Egyptian language, albeit written in Greek.²



“The Battle of the Pyramids,” Francois-Louis-Joseph Watteau. Oil on canvas, 1798-1799.
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Egyptology's modern history begins with the invasion of Egypt (1798-1801) by Napoleon Bonaparte. The subsequent publication of *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–28) made numerous ancient Egyptian source materials available to Europeans for the first time. Then, in 1799, the French engineer Jean-Francois Champollion discovered the

¹ Manetho was an Egyptian priest who wrote a history of Egypt in the late third century BCE. Although his original work was lost, portions of the text were quoted by later historians. Manetho's text and his division of Egyptian rulers into different dynasties are the basis for the chronologies and naming conventions used by Egyptologists.

² Coptic Christians are native Egyptian Christians. Their language is descended from Egyptian spoken during the Roman Period. Since the 18th century, the Coptic language has been used almost exclusively in religious services.



Rosetta Stone, a stela with an inscription written in hieroglyphic, Greek, and Demotic.³ Based on his knowledge of Coptic, Champollion was able to translate the hieroglyphics on the stone in 1822. In 1828, Champollion and an Italian scholar, Ippolito Rosellini, led an exhibition to Egypt and a Prussian exhibition (1842-1845) to Egypt followed. Sir John Gardner Wilkinson also traveled in Egypt from 1821-1833, copying and collecting materials. The work of these early Egyptologists enabled the wide circulation of copies of monuments and ancient Egyptian texts throughout Europe.

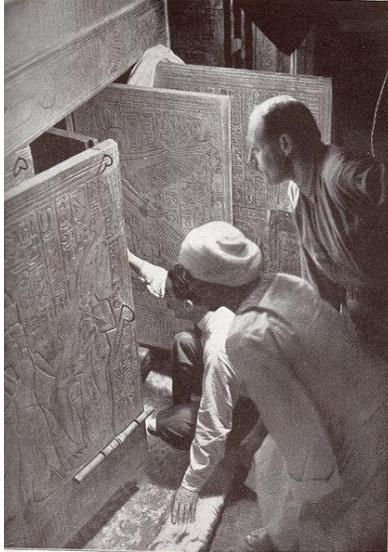
After Egypt was opened to Europeans and consular agents, explorers began plundering antiquities. The objects they collected form the basis of the excellent collections of ancient Egyptian artifacts in Europe. The first museum in Egypt was founded in 1858 in Būlāq and was later moved to Cairo. The Service des Antiquités was established in 1863, led by the French Egyptologist, Auguste Mariette (1821-1881). One of the goals of this organization was to stop the uncontrolled excavation and collection of antiquities.

Egyptology was established as an academic discipline through the research of Emmanuel de Rougé (1811-1872) in France, Samuel Birch (1813-1855) in England, and Heinrich Brugsch (1827-1894) in Germany. In 1880, Flinders Petrie (1853-1942), another British Egyptologist, revolutionized the field of archaeology through controlled and scientifically recorded excavations; his work determined that Egyptian culture dated back as early as 4500 BCE. The British Egypt Exploration Fund (founded in 1882) and others Egyptologists promoted Petrie's methods. Other scholars worked on producing a hieroglyphic dictionary, developing a Demotic lexicon, and establishing an outline of ancient Egyptian history.

In the United States, the founding of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago and the expedition of James Henry Breasted (1865-1935) to Egypt and Nubia (1895-1896) established Egyptology as a legitimate field of study. In 1924, Breasted also started the Epigraphic Survey with the goal of making and publishing accurate copies of monuments. In the late 19th and early 20th century the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the University of Pennsylvania; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Brooklyn Institute of Fine Arts; and the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University also conducted excavations in Egypt, expanding American collections.

³ Demotic is an ancient Egyptian script derived from hieratic, a simplified cursive form of hieroglyphics, used in northern Egypt.





An Egyptian workman, Howard Carter (kneeling), and Arthur Callender inside Tutankhamen's tomb.
Photograph by Harry Burton, 1922.

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Two fantastic finds—the discovery of the intact tomb of Tutankhamen's in 1922 by Howard Carter and George Herbert and the discovery of the royal tomb at Tanis by Pierre Montet in 1939-1940 helped foster public awareness of Egyptology and fueled the general public's long-standing interest in ancient Egypt in Europe and North America. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, architects, authors, artists, and the developing film industry used elements of ancient Egyptian culture as a source of inspiration for many works. In particular, the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen fostered two decades of fascination with Egypt that lasted until after the Second World War. New discoveries and the development of mass media also allowed for a wider appreciation of ancient Egyptian culture in the 20th century.

Interest in Egypt was renewed in the late 20th century by the UNESCO-sponsored relocation of the temples of Nubia and Philae above the waters of Lake Nasser from 1960-1975, Egyptian government-sponsored tours of artifacts from Tutankhamen's tomb in London and the United States in the late 1970s, and excavations at ancient Nubian sites and the cities of Avaris, Pi-Ramses, and Mendes. The First International Congress of Egyptology convened in Cairo in 1976 and continues to meet in order to promote contact among scholars throughout the world. Since the early 1950s, Egyptians have become more involved in Egyptology and regional museums dedicated to ancient Egyptian culture have opened in Alexandria, Mallawī, Luxor, and Aswan. Thousands visit each every year.

