

Ancient Egypt

A Gift of the Nile

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The Nile Defined Egypt

Egyptian civilization existed at the same time as Mesopotamian civilization but differed in some important ways. Egypt was united, early in its history, into a single country and lasted for nearly 3,000 years. Egyptian civilization was dependent on the Nile River and the fertile soil that its annual inundations provided. It has been said the Egypt was a gift of the Nile and its unity is attributed in part to the regions geographical features.

The Nile River travels from the highlands of eastern Africa to the Mediterranean Sea, covering nearly 4,100 miles. It is the longest river in the world. The flow of the Nile is broken by large jagged granite cliffs, which create churning rapids called cataracts. The first cataract is located at Aswan and there are five others further south. Early boat traffic could not move past these cataracts and thus ancient Egyptian civilization was limited to the region north of Aswan.

The land adjacent to the southern Nile (Closer to Aswan) was called Upper Egypt. Where the Nile enters the Mediterranean Sea, the river creates a huge delta, a marsh full of weeds and rushes. The delta is an extremely fertile region once cultivated. This delta was called Lower Egypt. Egyptians were aware of the division between Upper and Lower Egypt and referred to their country as "the two lands." The Nile provided an easy, reliable system of transportation between upper and lower Egypt. All that was required to move between upper and lower Egypt was a boat. The Nile flowed north toward the Mediterranean so those moving north simply floated with the river. Southbound boats hoisted a large sail and used the prevailing winds to move south.

This video reviews the importance of the Nile for Egyptian Civilization. It includes how the Egyptians farmed and irrigated the land along the river.

Life along the Nile: A Gift

As stated above, the Nile provided the people of the Egypt with life giving water and rich soil deposits. Every year in June, spring rains and melting snow from the mountains of East Africa caused the Nile to flood, and when the river receded farmers received the gift of rich dark soil deposited by the flood year after year. Before the scorching sun could dry out the land, they hitched their cattle to plows and prepared their fields for planting. They planted wheat and barley and watered their crops, like the Sumarians, with an intricate system of irrigation canals. Egyptian life was a predictable cycle of flood, plant and harvest.

Unlike Mesopotamia, the flooding of the Nile was was predictable. Egyptians worshipped the Nile as a God and believed they were blessed because their god always favored them with regular floods and bountiful harvests. These factors allowed Egyptians to approach life with more confidence and optimism. The flood waters of the Nile, however, would sometimes disappoint Egyptians. If the floodwaters were just a few feet lower than normal, the amount of fresh soil would be less and many would starve. If the floodwaters were a bit higher, then the surrounding towns and villages were destroyed. A reverence for the power of the Nile led Egyptians to carefully observe all of their religious rituals to keep the gods happy.

A Desert Shield

All of Egypt's villages and cities were built along the Nile on a thin fertile strip. The land beyond this strip quickly turned to desert which became the Saharan Desert to the west and the Arabian Desert and Red Sea to the east. The division between fertile land and desert was so abrupt that you could stand with one foot on fertile soil and the other on desert. While the deserts limited Egyptian civilization, they also provided security by preventing foreign invasions. For much of its history, Egypt was spared the constant warfare that plagued the Fertile Crescent.

The only invasion route into Egypt lay across a narrow corridor called the Isthmus of Suez within the Sinai. In time, invaders would reach Egypt by way of this geographic link with Southwest Asia. However, for hundreds of years, the deserts kept Egypt secure from any serious attack.



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The Beginnings of Political Unity

Originally Egyptians lived in small farming villages. Overtime these villages were united into districts called nomes. Each nome had its own unique rituals, gods and chieftains. These nomes often developed rivalries and invaded each other's territories. The search for wealth and better lands led many Egyptians to migrate from one nome to another and to begin trading with Mesopotamia across the Sinai.

After 3,200 B.C., important political changes altered Egyptian society. The first kings arose and united the territories of many nomes. This process was encouraged by the development of their own system of writing called hieroglyphs. The Egyptian language was a symbolic or pictographic language. Our ability to read hieroglyphs today was derived from the Rosetta Stone, discovered by Napoleon's troops in 1799. The Rosetta Stone included the same statements in Greek and hieroglyphs. This system of writing may have been borrowed, at least in part, from Mesopotamia through trade. Mesopotamian influence was limited, however, and the Egyptians developed their own culture. The various nomes of Egypt were eventually consolidated into two larger states, each with its own king. One ruled lower Egypt and wore a red crown and the other ruled upper Egypt and wore a tall white crown.

By 3,100 B.C., a strong willed king of upper Egypt named Menes (MEE-nee-z) united the kingdoms of upper and lower Egypt. He shrewdly established his capital near the spot where Upper and Lower Egypt met, about 100 miles from the Mediterranean Sea. The capital was called Memphis. Menes was the first of a long series of kings to rule over a unified Egyptian state. Menes combined the crowns of both lower and upper Egypt.



Images of King Menes or Narmer, taken from Wikimedia Commons without restrictions.

After Menes' death, his kingdom was passed from father to son creating the first Egyptian dynasty. A dynasty is a kingdom ruled by a series of rulers from a single family. Egypt would have 31 dynasties throughout its history spanning 2,800 years. Egypt's stability was tied to its king. When a weak ruler reigned, the nobles from the nomes would rebel and fight among themselves allowing outside interference. A strong king would follow and stability and prosperity would return. The Egyptian king was called a Pharaoh.

Once established, the Pharaoh sought to gradually centralize Egyptian society. To supervise the irrigation of the land and to oversee the storage of the grain crop was essential to avoid famine, the greatest threat to the growing Egyptian population of about 4 million people. The Pharaoh believed that a centralization of power would prevent rebellions that disrupted Egyptian life and thus contribute to the stability of Egyptian society.

The Kingdoms of Egypt

After 2,700 B.C., historians break Egyptian history into three distinct phases: the Old Kingdom (2,700 to 2,200 B.C.), the Middle Kingdom (2,100 to 1,800 B.C.) and the New Kingdom (1,570 to 1,080 B.C.). The common element that linked these three different phases of Egyptian history was the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh was much more than a King and differed greatly from leaders within Mesopotamian culture. In Mesopotamia, kings were considered representatives or servants of the gods. The ancient Egyptians believed that their kings or Pharaohs were gods on earth almost as splendid and powerful as the gods in heaven.

The Old Kingdom

The history of Egypt's first two dynasties is little known, but records improve with the Third Dynasty. Historians call the period that began with the Third Dynasty the Old Kingdom. This period ran from 2,700 to 2,200 B.C. and set the culture of Egypt for nearly 3,000 years. The Old Kingdom saw the rise of the power of the Pharaoh and the centralization of Egyptian political power.

The Pharaoh

The god-like Pharaoh stood at the center of Egyptian religious belief, politics, and the army. The Pharaoh bore full responsibility for the welfare of the Egyptian people. It was he who caused the sun to rise, the Nile to flood, and the crops to grow. It was his responsibility to foster truth and justice and all good things were derived from his power. This created a theocracy where the people did not dare to question the power of their ruler.

It was believed that the Pharaoh continued to have influence over the Egyptian state even after his death. He had a Ka (Kah) that continued to take part in the living world. The belief in a Ka placed great importance on the burial chamber of the king. He must have food and comfort in the after life and a belief that his ka had to refresh itself by returning to its human body led to the creation of an elaborate burial process.

The walls of the burial chamber were decorated with images of food and pleasures from the human world to ensure comfort for the Pharaoh. Many times furniture was placed in the tomb as was gold and other forms of wealth. There are instances where the king's living servants were buried with him. Great care was also taken to preserve the body for the Pharaoh's ka. The Greek Historian Herodotus provided this description:

"First, they draw out the brains through the nostrils with an iron hook ... Then with a sharp stone they make an incision in the side, and take out all of the bowels... Then, having filled the belly with pur myrrh, cassia, and other perfumes, they sew it up again; and when they have done this they steep it in natron (a mineral salt), leaving it under for 70 days... At the end of 70 days, they wash the corpse, and wrap the whole body in bandages of waxen cloth."

The Pharaoh's tombs were more important than his palace as he needed to reign forever from this structure. During the Old Kingdom, Egyptians developed tombs that were called mastabas. These were simple stone mounds that enclosed a burial chamber. These simple tombs evolved into step pyramids and finally into the great pyramids of Giza. These structures were built by peasants in exchange for food during the flood season. The stones were cut from quarries farther south along the Nile and shipped to the site in Lower Egypt where the pyramids were built. There are about 80 pyramids in the Egyptian desert but most no longer hold the mummies of pharaohs. Robbers stole the treasures and bodies long ago. The Egyptians abandoned pyramids during the New Kingdom and began to bury their Pharaohs in the cliffs of a valley called the Valley of the Kings, which provided more protection from robbers and foreign invasions.



Mastabas (Left Picture) Step Pyramid (Center Picture) The Great Pyramids (Right Picture)

All images taken from Wikimedia Commons

The Great Pyramids of Giza were the architectural achievement of the Ancient World. Each stone was perfectly cut and weighed 2 1/2 tons. Some of the larger stones weighed as much as 15 tons. There are more than 2 million stone blocks in the Great Pyramid, which is 481 feet high and covers 13 acres. It was once believed that the pyramids were built with slave labor but recent scholarship has discovered that they were built with paid labor during the flood season. Farmers needed to buy food during the off season and the Pharaoh paid them with grain from his store houses.

Toward the end of the Old Kingdom, the power of the Pharaoh declined and more power fell into the hands of nobles and local officials. These rulers struggled among themselves for control and civil war tore Egypt apart. Some scholars think that these troubles began with a change in climate. Less rain fell in the African highlands, causing the Nile floodwaters to be too low. Crops died, and the threat of starvation hung over Egypt. The Pharaoh's inability to provide for his people led many to question his authority. Egyptians called this period of turmoil the "First Illness." From 2180 to 2080 B.C., poor harvest, lawlessness, and warfare plagued the region.

The Middle Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom dates to the reign of Menthu-hotep. During his reign law and order returned to Egypt, farming and trade grew, and the arts flourished. The capital of Egypt was moved from Memphis to Thebes. The pharaohs of this period concentrated much wealth on large projects designed to increase the amount of farmland in the Delta region and irrigation ditches to increase the amount of water available for crops. The life of the average person in Egypt improved dramatically during the Middle Kingdom.

During this period, new religious beliefs increased the importance of the common man. During the Old Kingdom, only the pharaoh expected to live forever. During the Middle Kingdom, Egyptians came to believe that ordinary people had eternal souls as well. People of all classes planned for their burials, so that their place in the afterlife would be assured. This new belief took away some of the pharaoh's grandeur. The prosperity of the Middle Kingdom did not last and a "Second Illness" ravaged the country. Civil war broke out across Egypt allowing outside invaders to move across the Isthmus of Suez in horse-drawn chariots.



A painting of Thebes by Edward Poynter, 1867, taken from Wikimedia Commons

The New Kingdom

These horse-drawn conquerors were called the Hyksos, or Rulers of the Uplands and controlled Egypt from 1640 to 1570 B.C. They were a mixed people, speaking a Semitic language. Some archaeologists believe they were Syrians fleeing the Hittite invasion of their own country. The Hyksos introduced horse-drawn chariots and the composite bow to Egypt. It was their ability to use these new weapons of war that gave them their superiority over the Egyptians.

The Hyksos served as a ruling elite over the Egyptians and were despised by most Egyptians. The Hyksos taught the Egyptians some very important lessons. They learned to make bronze weapons, use chariots and bows, and learned improved spinning and weaving techniques. After 1600 B.C., a series of pharaohs, Ahhotep (a woman) and Ahmose defeated the Hyksos and drove them into Palestine.

After the defeat of the Hyksos, Egypt entered a period of great wealth and power. The Egyptians established an empire hoping to avoid another invasion from Mesopotamia. They no longer trusted the desert to protect them. The pharaohs of this age were warlike and equipped their army with bronze weapons, two wheeled chariots, and bowmen. This force became Egypt's first professional army.



Ahmose defeats the Hyksos taken from Wikimedia Commons

The New Kingdom was noted for several great pharaohs. The most surprising was Hatshepsut (hat-SHEP-soot). This remarkable woman became pharaoh during a period when Egyptian tradition and law only allowed men to hold this position. She ruled successfully for 22 years. She wore men's clothing, a fake beard, and the pharaoh's crown. Her reign is not known for war but instead a dramatic growth in trade and wealth with Africa and Mesopotamia. Her death is a mystery and scholars have never been able to prove whether she died of natural causes or her son, Thutmose, who wanted to be pharaoh, killed her.

Thutmose proved to be an effective warrior pharaoh. He carried the Egyptian empire into Palestine and Syria as well as south into Nubia. His efforts brought riches, slaves and new ideas to Egypt. He created the first true Egyptian empire. Once in Palestine and Syria, Egyptians encountered the Hittite people and fought many battles for the control of these regions. Neither the Egyptians nor the Hittites were able to defeat the other. The Egyptians were forced to recognize that there were other powers that were their equals.

Ramses II (RAM-seez) was known as one of the great builders of the New Kingdom and Egypt's last great pharaoh. He reigned for 67 years, lived to be 99, and had 150 children. He built many great temples and palaces adorned with his image. Ramses II oversaw the decline of the powerful Egyptian empire. The tribes of Palestine rebelled and forces from Libya repeatedly attacked Egyptian towns. Shortly after Ramses II's death, a wave of invasions from an unknown new people quickly overwhelmed them. Egypt would see many invasions from the Assyrians, Persians and other powers.

Egyptian Society and Culture

Despite changes in leadership, civil wars, and invasions, Egyptian society and culture remained remarkably stable. You should think of Egyptian society as a pyramid with the pharaoh at the top. Below the pharaoh and his family were the nobility. The nobility were a vital part of Egyptian society. They were the governors, generals, tax collectors, and lower level officials. Government service was not limited to men. Women had great freedom within Egyptian society. They could own and sell property, propose marriage or seek a divorce.

The nobility lived lavish lifestyles and did not want for pleasure or food. They dressed in cotton with gold jewelry and often held banquets. Most of the nobility were born noble but there was the ability to move up from lower classes. The primary method of moving up in social status was service to the pharaoh through the army. If a soldier distinguished himself, he would be granted land, animals, and social benefits. This land was passed to his son and remained within the family. The one factor that was required for government service, however, was not available to all. You needed to know how to read, which prevented most Egyptians from advancing.

Peasants represented the bottom of the pyramid. Scholars know less about the peasants of Egypt than about the upper class. Very little about the daily lives of peasants were recorded by scribes. The primary source of information about peasants comes from wall paintings in tombs. These paintings show that peasants worked hard and had few luxuries. Planting, cultivating, and harvesting in the hot sun were grueling work. Women worked beside men in the fields. Peasants did not even own the land they farmed. The land belonged to the pharaoh and was parceled out by royal officials. These officials hauled away a large share of the harvest as taxes. While the peasants had difficult lives, there were some positives. They were generally left with food after the harvest and often held celebrations when the harvest was complete. They played music, games, and drank barley beer.

Like Mesopotamia, Egyptian society recognized the institution of slavery. During the New Kingdom's wars of conquest, thousands of slaves were brought to Egypt from Asia and Nubia. Slaves performed every kind of service for their noble masters. They gave them baths, combed their hair, cooked meals, watched their children and feed their cattle. Loyal service could eventually lead to freedom. Some slaves were sent, however, to the stone and gold mines of upper Egypt. They were often worked to death by the pharaohs' overseers.



Mural of Egyptian peasants harvesting crops, taken from Wikimedia Commons

Egyptian Religious Practices

Egyptians practiced a polytheistic religion with gods representing many aspects of nature and life. The principle that seemed to connect all of the various religious beliefs was maat (muh-aht). Maat was the idea of justice, right, truth, and order. To live according to maat meant always trying to act rightly and justly. Everyone, including the Pharaoh, was supposed to uphold this ideal. The idea of maat influenced the behavior of man and gods.

Egyptians believed they would be judged for their deeds when they died. Osiris, the powerful god of the dead, would weigh each dead person's heart. They believed the heart was the seat of the human soul. To win eternal life, their heart could be no heavier than a feather. Osiris would make the final decision and if your heart failed then the Devourer of Souls would gobble it up denying you eternal life. Eternal life for the average Egyptian was exactly like their life here on earth. The rich would continue to hold banquets and the poor worked in the fields.



Osiris, taken from Wikimedia Commons

The priestly class was important in Egypt because it was believed they had the power through their magic to forgive unkind acts that would prevent eternal life. Their magic could impress and influence the Gods. They recorded the prayers of the deceased in a Book of the Dead and buried it with them for the Gods to consider. During the New Kingdom, priests were so successful that they controlled more land, more slaves, and more wealth than the pharaoh himself.

The power of the priest worried one famous pharaoh, Akhenaton in 1375 B.C. Akhenaton did everything in his power to convert Egyptian religion to monotheism. He believed that Aton, the Sun God, was the only true god and wanted all Egyptians to worship Aton. He forbade the worship of all other gods including Amon, the god of air, wind, and life. The most powerful part of the priestly class worshipped Amon and it is believed that Akhenaton was trying to weaken the priestly class by elevating his god. He converted all temples and had his priest remove the images of Amon from all temples. The average Egyptian refused to give up their gods and this led to great protest in Egypt during Akhenaton's reign. Egypt returned to polytheism when he died and the new pharaoh Tutankhamen (King Tut) reversed all of this policies. Tutankhamen died young but was honored by the priest with the placement of great amounts of gold, which was discovered in 1922 A.D. by Howard Carter.



The Pharaoh Akhenaton taken from Wikimedia Commons

Achievements of Egyptian Society

Writing: Egyptians developed a form of pictographic writing called Hieroglyphics. The term comes from the Greek word hieros and glyphe, meaning "sacred carvings." During the New Kingdom Egyptians slowly moved away from hieroglyphics and after the fall of Egypt the ability to read this language was lost. In 1799, near the delta village of Rosetta, some French soldiers found a polished black stone inscribed with a message in three languages. One version was written in hieroglyphics, another was in simpler form of hieroglyphics, and the third was in Greek. A young Frenchman named Jean Francois Champollion used the Rosetta Stone to translate hieroglyphics. Egyptians invented a new writing surface. They used the tall stalks of papyrus, a reed that grew in the marshy delta. The Egyptians split the reeds into narrow strips, soaked them, and then pressed them into sheets of paper like material. The English word for paper comes from papyrus. Egypt's dry climate preserved papyrus for centuries. Modern scholars can still read writings that are more than 5,000 years old.



Hieroglyphics translations:

1. A Kingly
2. Gift of an
3. Offering table
4. To
5. Ra-Horus
6. The great
7. God
8. Lord of
9. Heaven

Numbers: The government of Egypt needed a way of doing arithmetic for the purpose of assessing and collecting taxes. Out of this need, Egyptians invented a system of written numbers for counting, adding, and subtracting. The system was fairly clumsy for numbers greater than 100. To express the figure 999, scribe had to write 27 symbols.

Geometry and surveying: One job of the pharaoh's officials was to assign plots of land to peasant families. Because of the Nile's flooding, this job had to be redone every year. To save time and effort of measuring the plots new every year, Egyptians developed an efficient method to survey farming areas. This method was the origin of modern geometry.

A Calendar: To be sure of a good crop, peasants needed to plant at exactly the right time of year. Crops had to be planted and harvested before the next flood. Therefore, the Egyptians developed a calendar to keep track of the time between floods. Officials had observed that a very bright star, now known as Sirius, began to appear above the eastern horizon just before the floods came. The time between one rising of Sirius and the next was 365 days. They divided this year into 12 months of 30 days each and added 5 days for holidays and feasting. This calendar was so accurate that it fell short of the true solar year by only six hours.

Medicine: Egyptian doctors were the most famous in the ancient world. Their medical services were in demand at royal courts in many kingdoms around the Mediterranean Sea. Although Egyptian medical writings contain all sorts of magic charms and chants, Egyptian doctors also had much practical knowledge. They knew how to check a person's heart rate by feeling for a pulse in different parts of the body. They dealt with broken bones, wounds, and fevers. All in all, they approached their study of medicine in a remarkably scientific way.

The Kingdom of Kush: Egypt's Southern Neighbor

The Kingdom of Kush is often overlooked when studying early kingdoms of Africa. Kush was a major trading civilization in Northeast Africa and it benefited from its closeness to the Red Sea and trading villages in sub Saharan Africa. The first Kushite capital was at Napata but moved it south to take it out of range of Egyptian armies. The new capital was the city of Meroe, which was located in a region rich in resources. The new capital became a major center of iron-smelting and was responsible for the spread of iron tools and weapons into southern Africa. Merchants in the city of Meroe traded iron for luxuries from India and Southwest Asia.

The rulers of Kush lived lives of luxury like the Egyptian Pharaohs. They also developed a system of hieroglyphic writing. Much about early Kush remains a mystery since their language has not been translated. Scholars know that it was based on an alphabet but do not know what the characters mean. Excavation of Kushite sites is underway but is limited because of current conditions in the Sudan, which is where the majority of the the Kingdom of Kush was currently located.



While this map is not in English, you can clearly see the Kingdom of Kush to the south of Egypt along the Nile.

The map was taken from Wikimedia Commons.

Points to Remember

- Like Mesopotamia, Egyptian civilization developed in a river valley, the Nile River, because of the rich soil, water source and protection from invasion.
- Egyptians developed a centralized theocratic government that developed into an Empire during the New Kingdom
- Egyptians developed a hereditary leader called the Pharaoh.
- Egyptians developed a rigid social order with the Pharaoh at the top followed by nobility and finally peasants at the bottom.
- Like Mesopotamia, Egyptians adopted Bronze weapons, new tools like plows, irrigation systems, advanced calendars and a pictographic language called hieroglyphics.



Egyptian Image taken from Wikimedia Commons