

# The Kingdoms of Ancient Egypt

Nile River Valley Civilization in the Ancient Era

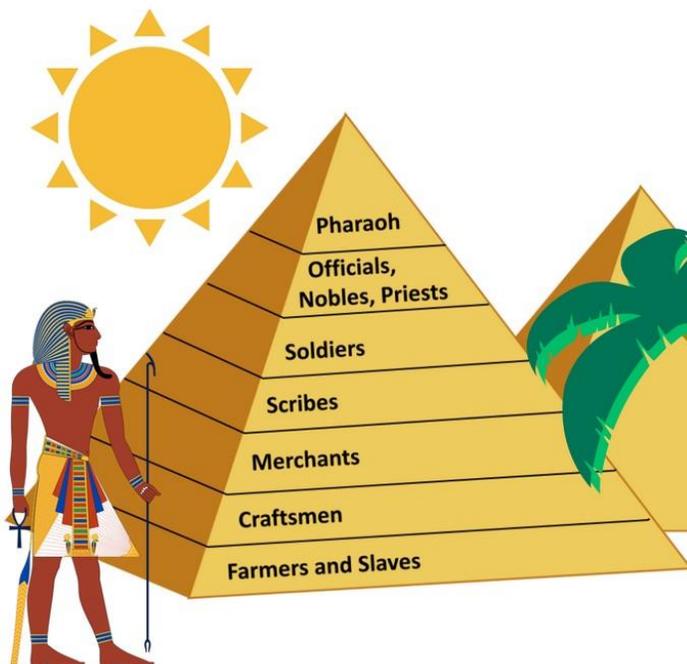
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## Civilization Dates

- c. 6000 BC: First settlement of the Nile River
- c. 3100 BC: Egyptian unification
- 2686-2181 BC: Old Kingdom
- 2181-2000 BC: First Intermediate Period
- c. 2000-1700 BC: Middle Kingdom
- 1700-1550 BC: Second Intermediate Period
- 1550-1077 BC: New Kingdom
- 1069-664 BC: Third Intermediate Period

## Food and Egyptian Politics

Being in a desert, Egypt depended on the inundation of the Nile. Whenever the Nile's flooding was shallow the chances of a food shortage increased greatly. This meant that despite the consistent food surplus there was always a risk of not being able to grow enough food any given year. As a result, food supplies had enormous political effects and it is believed that regularly bad growing seasons contributed to the decline of Egypt's political unity at the ends of both the Old and Middle Kingdoms.



During each of the unified kingdom periods Egyptian society was broken down as indicated in the figure to the right. In Egypt, religion was closely tied to government. **Divine kingship** was a major tenant of Egyptian civilization as the pharaoh was thought to be the incarnation of a god.

The elites of society enjoyed several privileges over the lower classes, such as escaping **compulsory labor**.

## **Unification of the Nile**

- Egyptologists believe that around 3100 BC a leader was able to unite Egypt politically.
- Little is known about the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.
- Some sources say this leader's name was Narmer. Others say it was Menes, but it is so unclear that it's possible these are different names for the same person!
  - The unification of Egypt established the concept of **divine kingship** in the mythology surrounding Narmer's conquest.
  - According to mythology Narmer was portrayed as Horus (a god of Lower Egypt, where Narmer was from) and he traveled to Upper Egypt and conquered Set (a god of Upper Egypt).
- Following unification, Narmer established his capital in **Memphis**.
- To help his new kingdom grow, Narmer led efforts to control floodwater by building a system of canals and **levees**.

## **The Old Kingdom**

- Egypt was largely unified as a single state and grew in complexity through the generations.
- Expanding trade and military campaigns helped accelerate the development of technology and culture.
- The existence of a strong **central government** with access to vast resources led to the building of **monumental architecture** like the Great Pyramids and the Great Sphinx.
- It was around this period that Egyptians began to build ships for trade.
  - Trade goods included incense, gold, copper, and Lebanese cedar.

### **Notable Leaders**

King Djoser (c. 2630 BC): First known **mastaba** built.

King Sneferu (2613-2589 BC): First smooth-sided pyramid.

King Khufu (2589-2566 BC): The Great Pyramid

King Pepy II (2278-? BC): Final Old Kingdom pharaoh. Long reign. Unclear date of death.

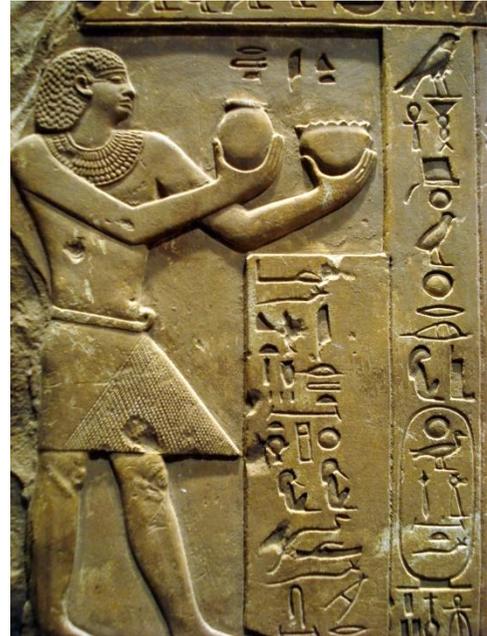
## **Chaos – First Intermediate Period**

Scholars believe that the unusually long reign of Pepy II caused some issues for the transition of power. The rise of regional governors and **famine** may have also led to one of the most chaotic periods in Ancient Egypt. Temples and tombs were raided, destroying art, writing, and records in the process.

## The Middle Kingdom

*"In simplistic terms we can point to the pyramids as the Old Kingdom's defining characteristic and at the empire for the New Kingdom; no comparable single feature describes the Middle Kingdom. It was a period of transformation." - Mark van de Mieroop*

- Though unifying, the central government was weak in this period. **Regional governors** held a lot of power.
- Despite being the shortest kingdom period, it was by far the most influential in terms of contributions to Egyptian culture.
- Art, architecture, and writing were vastly different from that of the Old Kingdom. While it maintained similar characteristics, it was clear that Egyptian culture was undergoing evolution.
  - The explosion of culture and the arts was a result of the weakened central government who normally commissioned and controlled art.
- The Middle Kingdom marked the start of an Egyptian **standing army** and the construction of **fortifications**.
  - Maintaining a military like this meant that the pharaohs regained control of vast amounts of resources.
  - This fact also acts as further evidence that Egypt was at least slightly unified.
- Unification did not last, and **political instability** invites invasion. While there is no precise date, it is generally believed that the Middle Kingdom ended c. 1700 BC.



## The Hyksos – Second Intermediate Period

- First appeared in Egypt c. 1650 BC.
- The **Hyksos** were a **Semitic** people (they spoke a language that originated in the Middle East) which meant they were foreigners to Egypt.
  - In Egyptian, Hyksos means “rulers of foreign countries”
- The Hyksos controlled most of Lower Egypt and the Nile Delta with their territory reaching as far south as the Egyptian capital Thebes.

- While they often fought over territory, the Hyksos never fully **deposed** the Egyptian pharaoh.
- With the rise in influence of the Hyksos in Egypt came the introduction of:
  - Improved bronze-working and pottery techniques.
  - New breeds of crops and animals, specifically horses
  - New military technology like the chariot, **composite bow**, battle-axes, and fortification techniques.
- With the introduction of new military technology, the Egyptians were eventually able to drive out the Hyksos c. 1550 BC.
  - Scholars suggest that an important factor was also that the Hyksos chose to assimilate into Egyptian culture, which made them too comfortable.

## **The New Kingdom**

- With the expulsion of the Hyksos and the restoration of centralized power, Egypt would enter its most prosperous era.
  - Increased foreign trade
  - Increased military power (thanks to the Hyksos)
  - Period of relative agricultural abundance.
- It was in this period that the term 'pharaoh' was first used to describe the king of Egypt. Originally it was used to refer to the king's palace, not the king himself.
- The god-king Amun would be fused with the sun-god Ra in this period, becoming the aptly named Amun-Ra. Second only to Osiris, Amun-Ra was considered one of the greatest gods in Egyptian **pantheon**.
- One of Egypt's famous female pharaohs, **Hatshepsut**, expanded Egypt's influence by establishing new trade networks into neighboring regions.
  - Generated new wealth
  - Commissioned hundreds of construction and art projects.
  - Ordered repairs to temples that were neglected by the Hyksos.
- One pharaoh decided that the cult of Amun-Ra was growing too influential.
  - He tried to force Egypt to worship one god and even changed his name to **Akhenaten** to honor this god, Aten.
- Akhenaten's son and successor, Tutankhaten, ended this movement.
  - This pharaoh, known as 'the boy king' or 'King Tut' went on to change his name to **Tutankhamun** and reestablished the worship of Amun-Ra.

- Tutankhamun was known for three things:
  - Restarting the worship of Amun-Ra
  - Dying at around the age of 17
  - Having one of the few tombs found completely intact.



Under the leadership of **Ramesses II** Egypt reached the height of its power as it expanded west against the Libyans and north against the Hittites. The war with the Hittites over control of the city of Kadesh ended with the world's first known **peace treaty**.

A variety of factors would eventually fragment Egypt into multiple city-states, inviting foreign powers once again.

### **Notable Leaders**

- Hatshepsut (c. 1478-1458 BC): Female pharaoh; expanded trade.
- Akhenaten (c. 1350-1334 BC): Tried to start worship of god Aten.
- Tutankhamun (c. 1332-1323 BC): 'Boy king'; tomb found intact.
- Ramesses II (1279-1213 BC): Ambitious military expansion.

### **The End – Third Intermediate Period**

The fall of the New Kingdom would mark the end of sustained Egyptian independence. Some factors that led to the end of the New Kingdom:

1. Cost of war – the imperial tendencies of the final pharaohs put a huge strain on the Egyptian economy.
2. Famine – shallow flooding on the Nile combined with constant war led to massive food shortages.
3. Civil unrest – **war weariness** and lack of food made local populations and governments resentful of central powers.
4. Official corruption – with constant war comes an increase of corruption. Government officials began cutting deals and stealing royal resources, further adding to food shortages and civil unrest.

The power vacuum that followed Egypt's political division led to a few different empires taking over Egypt:

1. Kushite Empire (c. 740-670 BC) – originally from Upper Egypt and modern Sudan. They often fought against Assyrian invasions until eventually falling.
2. Assyrian Empire (c. 670-656 BC) – as part of Assyria's campaigns to conquer Mesopotamia and its neighboring regions, Egypt became a **client state** (a self-governing state that pays mandatory tribute to a more powerful state).

Egypt was able to reestablish itself with the fall of Assyria. Egypt's freedom was short-lived as **Persian King Cambyses II** would soon conquer Egypt and claim the title of pharaoh for himself in 525 BC.

