

1.3 Ancient Egypt

Unification and the Old to Middle Kingdoms

When considering ancient Egypt, one typically thinks of the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Sphinx, King Tut, and Cleopatra. Some might even think of a certain Hebrew ordering an unnamed pharaoh to “let my people go!” All these things must have existed in roughly the same time period, right? Wrong! The final pyramid of Giza was completed almost 1,200 years before King Tut would take his first breath. King Tut drew his last breath 1,300 years before Cleopatra was even born! That means that Cleopatra lived closer to us today than she did to the construction of Great Pyramids!

Ancient Egypt is widely regarded as the most stable and consistent of the river valley civilizations. It existed for over 3,000 years and everything seemed so similar that it all just blends together in our imagination. Culture, religion, social organization, and government progressed, but at the same time it remained strikingly similar. The question then becomes, where did this stability and consistency come from?

I. Origins and Unification

To better understand why Egypt was such a long-lasting and consistent civilization we’ll be starting at its very origins. Naturally this includes a brief description of the region’s geography.

Natural Isolation

Beginning in Lake Victoria in East Africa, the **Nile River** flows south to north and drains into the Mediterranean Sea. As the world’s longest river it is easy to identify on most maps and it can be clearly viewed from space. The enormous yellow expanse of the **Sahara Desert** is briefly interrupted by a green strip along the banks of the Nile River. A massive **delta**, a flat plain that forms at the mouth of a river, branches out into the Mediterranean.



The vast majority of the region is made up of mountains, rocks, and dunes. Surrounding the valley are vast deserts that support relatively little plant and animal life. In the east more deserts and the **Red Sea** cut the valley off from much of the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. Several small oases can be found west of the Nile, but movement in and out of the region is limited because of merciless deserts that dominate the region. A truly unique culture will be born here, free from the threat of invasion for much of its early history thanks to the natural barriers that exist and its isolation from the rest of the world.

“Gift of the Nile”

The 5th century BC Greek historian, **Herodotus** (He-ROD-uh-tuhs), also known as the ‘Father of History’ described one of the region’s civilizations as the “gift of the Nile”. He was referring, of course, to Egypt. The success of the Egyptians has been attributed to the Nile by not just foreigners like Herodotus but the ancient Egyptians themselves. The Nile River flooded predictably twice a year in June and again in October. When it flooded, it would simply overflow its banks, spreading water across the valley. As a result, the Egyptians did not need to build dams to channel the water into canals as was done in Mesopotamia.



Flood waters began receding in October and it left behind new layers of silt that farmers could easily use to plant their crops. Thanks to the Nile's predictable nature and calm flooding pattern, the Egyptians were able to grow their grains in the best season, again unlike Mesopotamia. Still, the extent of flooding was impossible to predict. Stone staircases along the river's edge measured each flood. If floods were too high inhabited areas were often heavily damaged. Too low and some fertile land couldn't be irrigated which could lead to famine.

Wild animals stayed near to the river, offering meat and materials for hunters while fish were abundant. Papyrus reeds growing along the river provided fibers that could be used to make ropes, sails, and eventually a primitive form of paper known as **papyrus** (named after the plant it was made from). Even beyond the Nile itself, the Nile River Valley boasted an abundance of natural resources. Clay for use in construction was available practically anywhere and stone could easily be quarried and transported on the Nile. Copper could be found in the east and gold deposits were abundant just south of Egypt in **Nubia** (NU-be-a).

Farming was significantly easier in Egypt than it was Mesopotamia. It still required a great deal of manual labor, but the flooding pattern of the Nile meant that the planting process could be as simple as tossing seeds onto the ground and allowing cattle to step on them. With an abundance of natural resources and the nature of the Nile River, Egypt quickly became self-sufficient. Regional trade revolved around the Nile as its currents allowed sailors to travel upstream (south). With proper timing, sailors could catch the winds blowing south to north to travel downstream (north). Interregional trade revolved mostly around tin and luxury items like wood, ebony, olive oil, and wine until expanding in the New Kingdom.

Unification

Neolithic peoples began to settle around the Nile as early as 5000 BC. Civilization developed in much the same way as it did in Mesopotamia, with one key difference: settlements could be established closer to the riverbanks. The Nile was the only source of fresh water in the region and no wildernesses existed close to the river that could keep these settlements isolated from each other. In Mesopotamia, swamps and desert separated the city-states which made them independent, but this was not the case in Egypt. Egypt itself was isolated, but its settlements were not and so cities never had the opportunity to become city-states. Instead, cities were merely subjects to larger authorities.

For much of its earliest history, various cities were controlled by local rulers. Starting around 4000 BC, local rulers competed for control until only two remained. Now kings, one ruled Upper Egypt (the southern half) and the other ruled Lower Egypt (the northern half). No records have been discovered that can offer insight into the names or administrations of these kings or any of their descendants. The first known king of Egypt was Narmer. **Narmer** was a mysterious king who ruled over Upper Egypt circa 3100 BC. Scholars are unsure if Narmer is the same king as one that is called Menes by later Greek historians. Menes is traditionally credited with the unification of Egypt, but it is likely that Narmer and Menes are one and the same. He conquered Lower Egypt and solidified his rule of the north by marrying one of the former king's daughters. With a single king ruling both halves of Egypt, unification was achieved remarkably fast. In contrast, Mesopotamia wouldn't be unified under Sargon of Akkad for another 800 years.

Side Note: Hieroglyphics and Hieratic

The Egyptians began writing in a process that was not unlike that of the Sumerians. Their first writing system, **hieroglyphics**, was developed sometime between 3500 and 3100 BC and featured pictograms which were drawings that represented concepts. They would eventually become the symbols we typically think of as hieroglyphics. The symbols would be painted or carved into stone walls and monuments for religious and ceremonial purposes: to prepare sacred texts and to remember the deeds of past kings. A simpler version of this system, **hieratic**, was used in less extravagant matters such as recordkeeping for government and businesses. Hieratic was typically written on papyrus to speed up the recordkeeping process.

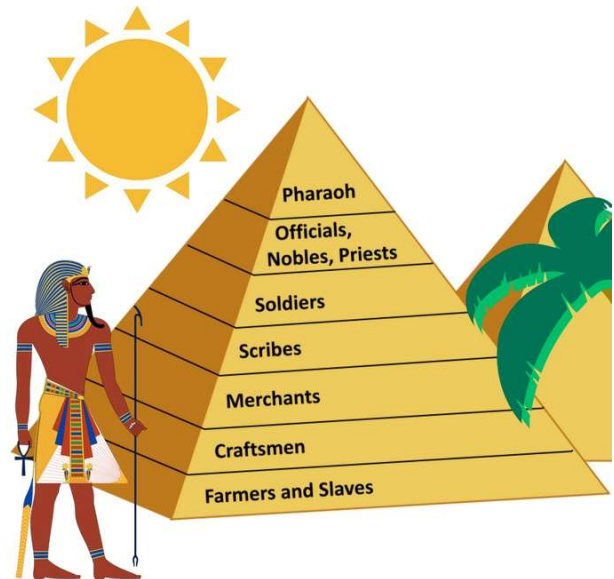


II. Basics of Society and Government

Thanks to the consistency of Egyptian civilization through the centuries, there are precious few changes in terms of governance and society over time. Of course, change is inevitable over long periods of time, but those changes mostly came as a result of the Bronze Age Collapse.

Social Divisions

Unfree laborers, slaves, made up the lowest level of society. They were normally prisoners of war. Above them were unskilled laborers such as domestic servants, herders, and farmers. Sharing the center of the hierarchy were the skilled workers: artisans (craftsmen), traders (merchants), and scribes. The warrior class was next, making up the armies of Egypt's kings which eventually become the first fully professional military force. Priests, nobles, and officials shared the highest level of society, enjoying privileges and influence that none of the aforementioned classes could rival. At the very top of the pyramid was the king, eventually called the pharaoh, who wielded near unlimited power and authority.



While the highest levels of society were firmly out of reach for commoners, there was a surprising amount of flexibility in Egyptian society. Ambitious individuals could improve their social position with enough hard work and dedication. Most farmers lived in small villages and likely supported each other in and out of the farming season. They maintained the relatively simple irrigation systems and would raise cattle or rely on fishing to add protein to their grain-heavy diet of wheat, beer, and assorted vegetables. The majority of farmers were peasants who did not own the land that they worked on. They paid rent to their landlords (normally nobles) by giving them a portion of their crops.

The family was the most important unit of Egyptian society, so much so that even their gods were grouped into families. The higher classes tended to be organized into **nuclear families** consisting of only parents and children lived together. Lower class families, especially farming families, typically lived together with their extended families.

Egyptian women enjoyed the most rights and privileges of all the river valley civilizations. They were almost legal equals to men as they were allowed to own property, engage in trade, and even initiate divorce. Women could serve as priestesses or work in the fields with their husbands. Wealthier women were usually permitted to manage household affairs while their husbands worked.



Egyptian children rarely received an education and most of their days were spent playing. As they grew older boys would learn their fathers' trade and girls would be taught how to sew, cook, and manage a household. The eldest children, normally the eldest son, would inherit the family business but was also responsible for taking care of their parents as they grew old. Proper burials were organized by the eldest children as well. The expectation was for children to marry and establish their own families as soon as they became teenagers – a standard for much of the world's cultures throughout history.

Egyptian Religion

The Egyptians were polytheistic, just as the Sumerians were. Their beliefs regarding their gods was informed by the natural world they lived in, again just as the Sumerians. This is where the similarities end. Though the gods could take human form, the Egyptians did not necessarily believe them to be anthropomorphic. For the Egyptians, the gods were benevolent (kind) and calm – just like the Nile. The most important gods of the Egyptian **pantheon**, or complete collection of gods, were those that represented the most important aspects of their lives: the sun, Nile, and death.

The sun-god, **Re** (RAY; right), and river god, **Hapi** (HAH-pee), were responsible for successful harvests. The god of the dead, **Osiris** (oh-SIGH-ruhs), oversaw the land of the dead. While the Mesopotamians had a morbid view of death, the Egyptians saw the afterlife as a place of joy, almost as a paradise. Why would they not? They believed their gods cared for them enough to provide for them in life, so why would the afterlife be any different?



One of the Egyptians' sacred texts, *The Book of the Dead*, was full of spells and prayers that were meant to prepare the soul for the afterlife. Once an Egyptian died, the ritualistic process of **embalming**, the preservation of a dead body to prevent decay, would begin for mummification. If done correctly and if the person in question lived a good life, then Osiris would judge them and find them worthy of entering paradise. If he found them unworthy, they would be condemned to an eternity of suffering. It was believed that Osiris weighed the person's heart against a feather. If it was lighter, they were worthy.

Priests played a huge role in the progress of society. Priests were organized into a variety of **cults**, groups focusing on the worship of a specific figure, and managed their god's temple. Typical temple responsibilities included the management of offerings, the maintenance of the god's statue (where the god was believed to reside), and the organization of cult-specific rituals and festivals. Outside of the temple, priests tended to the sick, poor, and elderly, and they completed rituals to ward off evil spirits and cast out demons. The primary occupation of the temple was to serve their god and the local population just as they believed the gods served them.

Religious festivals were a common occurrence throughout Egypt. These festivals gave the people a chance to drink in excess, engage in extraordinarily intimate public displays of affection, and shower their gods with worship and offerings. The highlight of each festival was the procession of the god's statue along the Nile. These festivals demonstrate how highly the Egyptians viewed their gods and the sheer devotion they had for them. What was not to like? Even though hard times sometimes came, the gods were generally kind to Egypt.



Divine Kingship

To clear up any misunderstanding now, we will be referring to Egypt's leaders as kings – not pharaohs – until the term is actually used in history. Literally meaning 'great house,' pharaoh became synonymous to 'king' in the New Kingdom period, which will be covered in the next unit. Egypt was a **theocracy**, a system of government in which the political leader was also the religious leader. The kings of Egypt all claimed **divine kingship**, meaning the king was an incarnation of a god. Each king was believed to be a reincarnation of Re's son, **Horus** (HO-ruhs), the falcon-god. The king's job was to maintain **ma'at**, or balance, in the universe. Although being seen as a god has its obvious perks, it also came with massive responsibilities, one of them being that the king was expected to act as a god!

It was the king's duty to ensure that Egypt prospered. The king's word was law and they wielded unlimited power, unlike their Mesopotamian counterparts. This meant that all legal decisions fell to the king – which likely explains why no formal legal code has ever been found in Egypt. Just as in Mesopotamia, the construction and management of irrigation systems fell to the king. Anything done for the king was viewed as religious service – including construction projects: from the construction of irrigation canals to elaborate tombs, the people labored with a surprising amount of enthusiasm.

A Complex Bureaucracy

Ancient Egypt had a **command economy**, meaning the central government controlled the production and trade of goods and services. From the local level of farming villages all the way up to the central government, bureaucrats kept detailed records of all economic activity. The bureaucracy's main role was to keep track of all means of production and instances of trade. Artisans and traders had little control over what they could make, what they could sell, where they could sell it, or how much they could sell it for .

Bureaucrats also managed the collection of taxes which would be used to pay for the bureaucracy, military, and royal family, as well as fund the construction and maintenance of temples, monuments, and public buildings. The highest-ranking government official of Egypt, the **vizier**, was appointed by the king and oversaw all of the kingdom's bureaucrats. They came to him for any variety of matters, whether it be to inform him of the kingdom's collected taxes or to test a sample of a city's water supply.

The importance of the bureaucracy in Egyptian government is symbolized in the many tombs of kings that have been discovered: many Old Kingdom kings were buried with their officials tombs nearby. The immense influence of the bureaucracy allowed Egypt to operate smoothly for centuries, but it was also a source of political tension. The centralized power of the king often came in conflict with the decentralized power of the bureaucracy, a power struggle that will be discussed in more detail in Part III of this section.



Side Note: The Rosetta Stone

A late 18th century discovery unlocked the mysteries of Egypt's ancient written language, hieroglyphics. Before this breakthrough, the most historians could understand about Egypt came from Greeks who wrote incessantly about it. **The Rosetta Stone**, discovered in AD 1799, was an incredible discovery for history. On it was a royal decree made by one of the Ptolemaic pharaohs, only it was written three times in three different written languages: Greek, demotic, and hieroglyphics. The Ptolemies were a Greek dynasty in Egypt.

III. Egypt in the Bronze Age

Egyptologists – scholars devoted to the study of Egypt – have divided Egyptian history into 31 dynasties. The dynasties are organized into three kingdoms: The Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom. Between each kingdom period there are brief intermediate periods that are characterized by the division of Egypt into two halves.

Old Kingdom (2686 – 2181 BC)

Unification under Narmer did not mean Egypt would become an efficient, well-organized kingdom overnight. Their great unifying leader tragically lost his life to a hippopotamus after an impressive reign of 62 years. Still he was able to begin the long process of organizing Egypt. The sustainable pattern of governance described in Part II took about 500 years to develop. The first time this pattern lasted for a significant period of time started in 2686 BC under **King Djoser**.

Djoser (JOE-ser) reigned for about 20 years and is most known for having begun the tradition of building pyramids. Before Djoser, a deceased Egyptian king would be buried in a mastaba which were relatively unassuming structures. Whether it was a mastaba or a pyramid, the tombs of kings and the wealth would be filled with all manner of luxuries that would go with the king into the afterlife. With the growth of the Egyptian economy, Djoser decided that his tomb should be set apart from those of his predecessors. He ordered the construction of Egypt's first pyramid, only it wasn't the smooth-sided pyramid we normally associate with Egypt. Instead, his was a step-pyramid similar to the ziggurats of Mesopotamia but at a much smaller scale.



Djoser's successors tried to replicate his pyramid, but most of them failed. This was likely due to the fact that they all died young, forcing builders to abandon their construction. Most were unfinished, but one has been found completed but ruined due to structural failures that led to its collapse just a few years after completion. The next king to successfully build a pyramid was **King Sneferu** who reigned from 2613 to 2589 BC. His pyramid, known as the Red Pyramid, was the first "true" smooth sided pyramid and is the third largest pyramid in all of Egypt today.

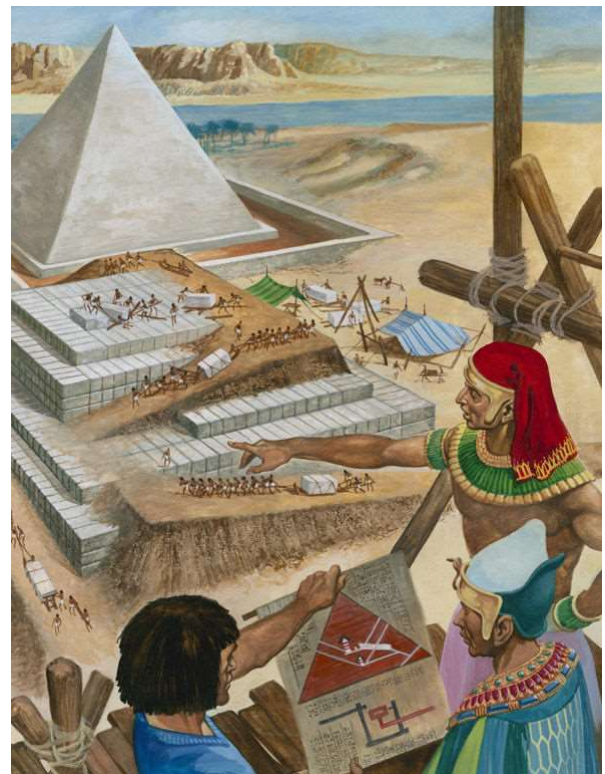


The most famous pyramid, **The Great Pyramid of Giza**, is the largest Egyptian pyramid and is considered one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The pyramid itself is made out of two million stone blocks of limestone and granite, each weighing at least 2.5 tons. They were all almost perfectly cut and stacked by thousands of workers. This massive tomb was built for King Khufu beginning around 2580 BC. It took anywhere from 10 to 20 years to complete.

Khufu's descendants, Khafre and Menkaure, built the other two iconic pyramids in Giza, though at a smaller scale. Menkaure is also credited with the construction of the sphinx that stands nearby, though some have debated this claim. The Pyramid Era, as it has been called, is a lasting reminder of the prosperity of the Old Kingdom of Egypt and the overwhelming authority of Egypt's rulers. Just as the Epic of Gilgamesh shows us that Mesopotamia's abundance allowed scribes to dedicate time to the arts, the pyramids show us that Egypt's abundance allowed workers to dedicate time to massive public works projects that ultimately served no purpose beyond satisfying the whims of powerful kings.

Though popular belief is that slaves built the pyramids – an idea that originated with the ancient Greeks – Egyptologists believe that the overwhelming majority of workers were farmers. Farmers worked on pyramids and similar monuments during seasons of **inundation**, the months that the Nile was flooded, and were actually compensated for their work. In addition to housing and generous rations (fixed amounts of food), farmers who worked on the public works projects were exempt from taxes for a year. Although it was technically **compulsory labor** (forced labor) at least the farmers were getting a little something in exchange for giving up their vacation days.

Pyramid workers were apparently very passionate about their work too. Evidence exists that shows groups of workers giving themselves crew names and engaging in friendly competitions with other crews. Remember this was being done for a god!





The final king of the Old Kingdom also built the final pyramid. **King Pepi II** reigned from 2278 BC till his death in 2184 BC. His reign lasted 94 years – the longest reign of any monarch in history. For as great as that may sound for Pepi, it was not so great for Egypt for three reasons. (1) Pepi outlived many of his own sons and those that remained were already so old that they died in the first few years of their reign. (2) Old people often suffer mentally and it's no surprise that a co-ruler was appointed when Pepi's mental health started going downhill. (3) Pepi was an incompetent king even before his old age made him senile. Rather than exercising the full range of his authority, King Pepi II empowered the nobility and allowed the bureaucracy to operate independent of the central government.

First Intermediate Period (2181 – c. 2000 BC)

By the time King Pepi II died, the Egyptian monarchy was overshadowed by local and regional powers. While high-ranking officials desperately searched for a successor with some ties to the royal family, nomarchs seized control of Egypt. **Nomarchs** were provincial governors that were appointed by the king but in time their positions became hereditary. During and after the reign of Pepi II, powerful families expanded their influence. Competition for power grew and Egypt was plunged into a period of chaos.

Egypt was split into two halves, almost exactly as it was before Narmer unified the two kingdoms. Upper and Lower Egypt fought in a near constant state of civil war and cultural development halted. Archeological evidence reveals that crime was rampant in this period, with temples, monuments, and tombs, including the pyramids, being looted and vandalized.

Middle Kingdom (c. 2000 – c. 1650 BC)

Order was restored in Egypt under the leadership of **King Mentuhotep II**. After reunifying Egypt and moving the capital to Thebes, Mentuhotep II restored centralized power by hosting a number of religious ceremonies and festivals celebrating his divinity, limiting the influence of the nobility, and creating an entirely new bureaucracy.

The Middle Kingdom is best seen as a transitional period for Egypt. Though initially powerful, the monarchy once again surrendered much of its authority in the later years of this period. Thanks to the growing weakness of the central government, artisans and traders were able to expand their professions. The arts flourished and interregional trade began to increase. Culture was beginning to thrive again. Unfortunately, increases in long-distance trade also leads to foreigners taking notice of their neighbor's prosperity. Invasions by small nomadic tribes become more common in this period as well, though by this point Egypt viewed it as more of a nuisance than as any serious threat.



Thanks to the constant civil wars of the First Intermediate Period and the increasing regularity of attacks by nomads, Egypt was bulking up its military capabilities. It's in the Middle Kingdom that the first professional army, a standing army, is formed. A **standing army** is a fully professional military force that dedicates itself to training and 'stands ready' for war. It is also in the Middle Kingdom that the first fortifications are built around major Egyptian cities.

The development of a standing army and the construction of fortifications in this period suggest that Egypt's kings regained a significant amount of authority and resources. However, it was clear that the central government was a shell of what it once was by the end of the Middle Kingdom Period. Sometime before 1650 BC a sizable tribe of nomads began travelling towards Egypt from the Caucasus mountains.

Second Intermediate Period (c. 1650 – c. 1550 BC)

For around 2,000 years Egypt had little contact with the outside world. The Egyptians would sometimes trade with neighboring powers or even find slaves in the south, but they never really interacted with the outside world for any significant amount of time. For the Egyptians, the thought of their kingdom being invaded by a foreign power was ridiculous. "No such thing could ever happen and if it did, no such power exists that could defeat us!"

The **Hyksos** (literally meaning 'foreign rulers') were another one of the Indo-European tribes that migrated out of the Caucasus mountains, along with the Aryans who travelled to the Indus Valley, and the Kassites who settled in Mesopotamia. The first waves of migrants were peaceful, but larger groups eventually came as conquerors. Riding in on chariots and armed with the composite bow, the Hyksos conquered the Egyptians in a shockingly short amount of time. In all their **hubris** (excessive pride and confidence), the Egyptians were caught sleeping by an ancient version of blitzkrieg. Having never seen chariots, let alone horses, Egypt's standing armies had no idea how to defeat such enemies.



The Hyksos took over most of Lower Egypt, from the capital of Thebes up to the delta. While Egyptian sources describe the Hyksos as cruel and tyrannical, modern evidence suggests that this was just ancient propaganda. In reality, the Hyksos were enamored with Egyptian culture, so much so that they assimilated very quickly. To **assimilate** means to take in and fully understand. They adopted the culture and blended with the local population. All the while, the Egyptian royal family kept control of Upper Egypt.

The Hyksos got just a little too comfortable in their new role as leaders of Lower Egypt. They proved to be capable rulers, but it was only a matter of time before the kings of Upper Egypt integrated the chariot and a number of the Hyksos military strategies into their own armies. Sometime around 1550 BC, under the leadership of **King Ahmose I**, Lower Egypt was liberated, and the two halves were unified once again. The remaining Hyksos were chased out of Egypt or slaughtered. Egypt's reunification marks the end of the Second Intermediate Period and the start of the New Kingdom.