

2.3 Egypt and Nubia

The New Kingdom and Kushite Empire

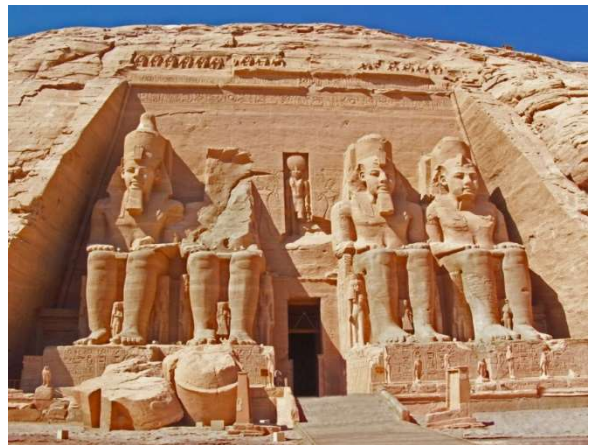
Following the expulsion of the Hyksos, Egypt entered its final period: The New Kingdom Period. At around the same time, an old power to the south built up its own strength and was able to establish its own empire soon after. The history of these Nile Valley powers is marked by transformation – a theme throughout the late bronze age.

I. The New Kingdom of Egypt (c. 1570 – 1070 BC)

Isolation was a major characteristic in Egyptian history in the Old and Middle Kingdoms. The New Kingdom stands in stark contrast to this idea. After liberating Egypt from the Hyksos, King Ahmose I founded the 18th dynasty of Egypt, a line of rulers who transform Egypt as conquerors from 1570 BC to around 1365 BC. The New Kingdom saw Egypt reach the height of its power through trade and conquest and Egyptians prospered thanks to the end of its isolation.

New Trends

Access to chariots gave the Egyptians a new ability to expand its influence with minimal risk. Chariots were, by the far, the greatest military technology of the late bronze age and now the Egyptians knew how to utilize them in battle. With this technology the Egyptians began a string of campaigns that pushed the boundaries of their kingdom northeast into the Levant and south into Nubia. One ruler, **Hatshepsut** (hat-SHEHP-soot), interrupted the campaigns in favor of focusing on the expansion of trade. Hatshepsut was one of the few female rulers of ancient Egypt who knew her gender would be used against her by her political opponenets.



Throughout her reign from 1472 to 1479 BC, Hatshepsut was careful to focus on projects that would win her the support of the people. She ordered the construction of magnificent temples and monuments, likely to show her devotion to the traditions of her people. Her very rule was seen as departure from these traditions as women were not typically found in such high positions of power. In response to this she adopted many of the traditional outfits and symbols that kings wore – most notably the characteristic fake beard. The term **pharaoh** referred the palace of the king but, beginning around 1570 BC, came to be an informal way to refer to the king. Around the time of Hatshepsut's reign, the term saw more regular use in official documents, though pharaoh never became an official title.



Hatshepsut was able to push Egyptian trade deep into Africa through a variety of expeditions that secured a steady flow of various luxurious **commodities**, or raw goods. These included gold, ivory, aromatics (like frankincense and myrrh), and a variety of rare plants and animals. Trade routes were also established in the Levant with the most significant imported commodity being purple dye and wood, which was in short supply in the desert. A reestablished connection with the outside world allowed for new products as well as cultural ideas to circulate around Egypt for the first time in centuries.

Naturally, Egypt's ambitions to connect to global trade meant that it had to enter into various diplomatic relations with the foreign powers it encountered. Egyptian **envoys** (diplomats, or representatives) were dispatched to these kingdoms in what historians consider the first time that a groups of nation worked together to reach common goals. Additionally, Egypt utilized royal marriages to forge friendly relations with its neighbors.

Hatshepsut's stepson and successor, **Thutmose III** (thoot-MOH-suh), brought Egypt back into conflict as he was far more interested in war than in diplomacy. Thutmose reigned from 1479 to 1425 BC and as pharaoh he utilized the powerful Egyptian army to create an empire. His armies extended Egyptian control northeast into the Levant and south to Egypt's southern neighbors in Nubia. These territorial holdings brought in massive quantities of wealth to the kingdom and Egypt enjoyed the most power and riches it ever would in its history.

Resistance to Reform

Following the reign of Thutmose III, each pharaoh worked to maintain Egyptian control over the various regions of the empire. Culture continued to flourish and one cult in particular grew in popularity and influence. The cult worshipped a newly evolved unknown god, Amun, who at some point fused with the sun-god, Re. This infused god, known as Amun-Re, became the greatest god in the Egyptian pantheon.



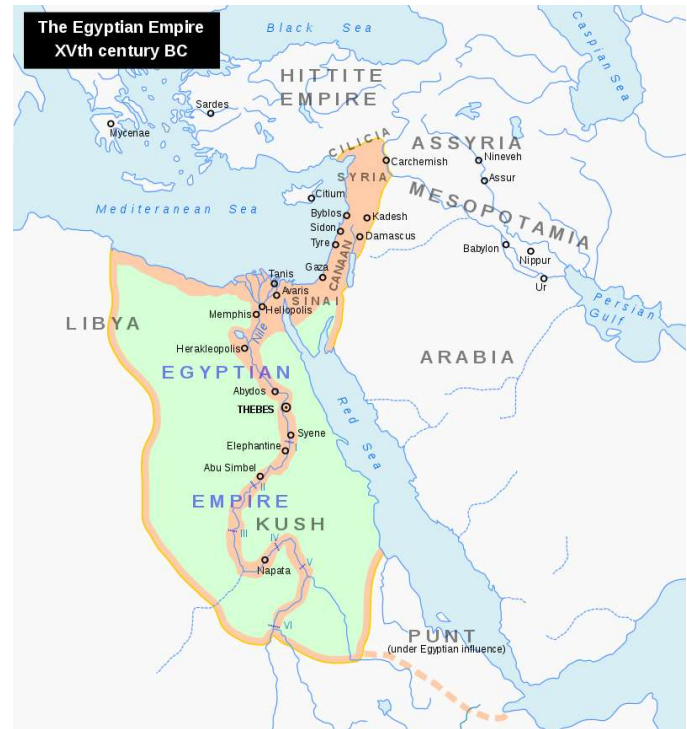
When Amenhotep IV took power around 1370 BC his fear of the growing influence of the priest of Amun-Re led him to create an entirely new monotheistic religion. The new religion was focused on a new sun-god called Aton. In his attempts to garner followers Amenhotep changed his name to **Akhenaten** (meaning 'Spirit of Aton'). Akhenaten also shut down many temples and removed priests from their posts in the government. His reforms were firmly opposed. In spite of his efforts, a majority of Egyptians continued to worship their many gods and the priests refused to stop give up their positions.

Akhenaten focused too much of his attention on his religious reforms and, as a result, the Egyptian empire lost many of its holdings in the Levant. When Akhenaten died around in around 1360 BC, his ten-year-old son took power. The young pharaoh relied on a group of advisors made up of priests and high-ranking officials. The most significant thing this boy king did was reverse all of the work his father did in establishing the worship of Aten. Originally named Tutankhaten (meaning 'servant of Aten') he changed his name to **Tutankhamun** (meaning 'servant of Amun'), signaling a transition back to the worship of Amun-Ra. The young king did little else in his short reign, dying of unknown causes at the age of 19. "King Tut's" fame in the modern imagination is due in large part to the fact that his tomb was one of the only pharaoh's tomb found completely undisturbed.



New Conquests and Decline

Following the death of Tutankhamun, the pharaohs attempted to restore the empire to what it was prior to the reign of Akhenaten. The most successful was **Ramses II** of the 19th dynasty. Known as Ramses the Great, he ruled for an impressive 66 years and left a lasting legacy in Egypt. Ramses was an ambitious conqueror and brought much of the Levant back under Egyptian control. By the time he reached Phoenicia in Syria, however, he was met with an equally dominant power – the Hittites. After a few battles the two powers realized they were more or less evenly matched. Diplomats from both sides negotiated a treaty –the first known in history– that was solidified by a royal marriage between Ramses and a Hittite princess.



Following the reign of Ramses II and beginning around 1200 BC, the Egyptian empire faced its greatest challenge. As with most empires, the cost of constant war and conquest began to drain the Egyptian treasury. With a declining economy and weakening military, Egypt was attacked by the infamous Sea People. Locked in a war of attrition, the empire was able to cling to power for quite some time in spite of the odds. Nevertheless, by around 1170 BC, Egypt controlled only the Nile Delta, a massive reduction of power. This marked the end of the New Kingdom.

The Egyptians were taken over by the Libyans from the west circa 900 BC.

II. Nubia

For centuries the people of Nubia lived under the shadow of the great kingdom to the north. They did not exist solely as slaves to Egypt, but they did spend many generations firmly under foreign control. This was not always the case following the collapse of the Middle Kingdom. As the Egyptians rebuilt themselves after being subjects to the Hyksos, their southern neighbors in Nubia began to build themselves up as well.

Kingdom of Kerma (c. 2500–1500 BC)

Unlike the Egyptians, the Nubians did not rely on the Nile river for its silt or water. The vast savannas that made up the region had plenty of fertile soil and plenty of rain fell throughout the year. Small Nubian villages rose up around these savannas, growing crops such as yams, beans, grains, and wild rice. Large herds of animals could be found throughout the region which meant hunting was also a large source for food.

Over time, stronger villages began to take over weaker ones until the **Kingdom of Kerma** formed. Agriculture was an important source of wealth for the Nubians of Kerma, but their primary money maker was gold which could be found in abundance throughout the region. A close relationship formed between the Kingdom of Kerma and Egypt based on the trade of gold, which the Egyptians believed was the metal of the gods. Their central location also made them an important trade link that connected Egypt to Africa's tropical regions.