

Ancient Egypt

Many great civilizations began beside rivers. There was rich soil for farming, abundant fishing and hunting, and water for drinking and irrigating crops. Between July and October each year, the Nile River, located in northeast Africa, fed by rain and melting snow from the African mountains, floods and spills over its banks. During the water's swift descent down the mountains, the turbulent streams pick up soil and carry it down to the river valley. As the Nile surges towards the Delta Region, the water overflows its banks before it empties into the Mediterranean Sea. This leaves behind a layer of silt, rich in nutrients that make it possible to grow crops in this otherwise arid land.

This is the fertile land that people began to settle in 3300 B.C. Drawn by the abundance of food provided by the Nile, people began to settle, farm, and build cities. Eventually, the area along the Nile River became the home of one of the world's earliest civilizations, the Egyptian Civilization. The Egyptians called their country the Black Land, referring to the fertile soil. The desert surrounding their country was referred to as the Red Land. The Red Land provided a natural barrier that protected Egypt from invaders. This is one of the reasons that the Egyptian civilization lasted over 3,000 years. It was the longest-lasting civilization in history, and its influence was so powerful that it is still felt today.

Egyptian influence on other ancient civilizations has been considerable. Its writing system, called **hieroglyphics**, and other cultural elements were widely adapted by other ancient cultures. In addition to writing, the Egyptians developed a paper-like material from **papyrus** reed. They also used papyrus to make mats, ropes, toys, boats, and other items.

Egyptians were excellent architects, builders, craftsmen, and artisans. They built huge pyramids in which to bury their pharaohs. One pyramid, the Great Pyramid of Giza, was so large and magnificent it was listed as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It is the only one of these wonders that still stands today. The Great Pyramid of Giza was built over 5,000 years ago without modern machines or tools. Over two and one-third million stone blocks, each weighing about two and one-half tons, were transported from a stone quarry on the other side of the Nile and built into a pyramid about as high as a 42-story skyscraper. All of this was done with manpower alone. Built near the Great Pyramid of Giza was the Sphinx, a huge stone sculpture of a creature with the face of a human and the body of a lion.

The Egyptians were superb engineers as well. They built canals, dams, and a reservoir to control the flood waters of the Nile. They even built a canal from the Nile to the Red Sea in order to improve trade.

Egyptians believed in life after death; a person's soul would continue to live as long as the body was preserved. The Egyptians practiced **mummification** of the dead. When someone died, their body was prepared in such a way that it would dry out and not decay. The bodies of the wealthy were wrapped in linen. Jewels and charms were inserted in the layers of linen in order to protect the deceased. The poor were generally buried naked in shallow graves.

Archaeology, history, and drama have made Egypt a subject of interest. Countless plays, books, movies, and even operas have been based on this ancient civilization.

EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION AT A GLANCE

WHERE: Along the Nile River in northeast Africa

WHEN: 3100 B.C.–332 B.C.

ACHIEVEMENTS:

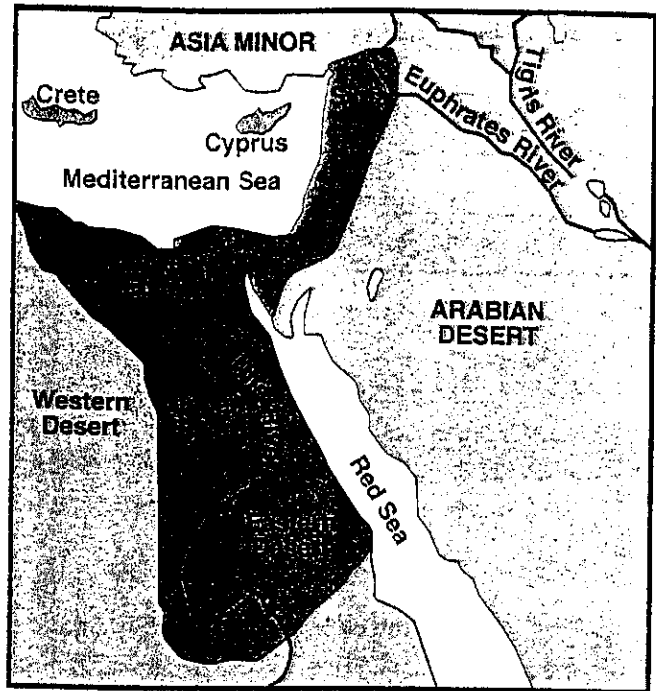
- Built the pyramids, the sphinx, canals, and temples
- Invented a calendar with 365 days
- Made a paper-like material from the papyrus plant
- Used a loom to weave cloth
- Invented a system of writing called hieroglyphics

Egypt's Three Kingdoms

The Egyptian Civilization is generally divided into three periods: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom.

THE OLD KINGDOM

The first period of the Egyptian Civilization is called the Old Kingdom. It lasted from 3100 B.C. until 2040 B.C. Before 3400 B.C., Egypt was really two different kingdoms—Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. These names are deceiving because if you look at a map of this ancient country, you will see that **Lower Egypt** was located at the top of the map in the northern delta where the river spreads out and empties into the Mediterranean Sea. **Upper Egypt** was located in the south, and would be found on the bottom of the map. This inconsistency is easy to understand since the Nile flows north, not south. It flows parallel to the Red Sea and eventually empties into the Mediterranean Sea.



About 3100 B.C., King Menes, a king from the south, was credited with combining the Upper and Lower Kingdoms and uniting Egypt. Menes became the first pharaoh of Egypt. **Pharaoh** was the term given to the king or ruler in Egypt. Menes was the first king of the first dynasty of Egypt. Eventually there would be thirty dynasties to rule Egypt. A **dynasty** is a series of rulers from the same family or line.

It was during the Old Kingdom that many pyramids were built. One of the most important pyramids was the Great Pyramid of Giza. It was built as a tomb for the pharaoh Khufu. He is sometimes called Cheops.

During the Old Kingdom, pharaohs were considered gods. They owned the land and everything in the country. They could do anything they wanted and make any law they wanted to. This was called the "divine rights of kings."

Menes made Memphis the capital of Egypt. Since the country was so large, he could not rule it all by himself. He needed help. He assigned people he trusted to govern different sections of Egypt. These governors, or **nomarchs**, worked to be sure that all of the commands of the pharaoh were obeyed.

The Egyptian Kingdom was very large. Since the pharaoh lived in Memphis, and the nomarchs governed for the pharaoh in various parts of the kingdom, communication was important. In order to make communication more efficient, the Egyptians developed a written language called hieroglyphics. **Hieroglyphics** uses pictures of objects, such as animals or plants, to represent words. The Egyptian writers, or scribes, wrote their messages and kept records on a paper-like material that the Egyptians made from the papyrus reed.

About 2200 B.C., the nomarchs began to act more independently and obeyed the king less. Many broke away from Egypt, establishing their own provinces. Some of the nomarchs fought each other over territory. Eventually two separate kingdoms were established.

THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

In 2040 B.C., King Mentuhotep of the 11th dynasty reunited Egypt. He created a centralized monarchy, which launched the period known as the Middle Kingdom. He made Thebes his capital. The nomarchs lost power, and Egypt again became a centralized government. The pharaoh had all of the power in the country.

Things went well for the Egyptians during this time. Egypt became prosperous. New quarries were developed in order to build more temples and other structures. They built dams and a reservoir to manage the flood water. They expanded their kingdom south to Nubia. Egyptians brought gold, ivory, and slaves from Nubia. They also expanded trade during this period. The Egyptians traded with those living in the Middle East, along the Mediterranean, and in other locations. This trade brought peace and wealth to Egypt. Egyptians had time to create works of art, build temples, develop crafts, and practice their religion.

The Middle Kingdom ended when Egypt was conquered by the Hyksos from Canaan. The Hyksos were good soldiers and had superior weapons. The Hyksos had horse-drawn chariots and curved swords called scimitars, which were made of bronze. The wooden weapons of the Egyptians were no match for these modern weapons.

THE NEW KINGDOM

The third period of the Egyptian Civilization is called the New Kingdom, and it lasted from 1600 B.C. until 1100 B.C. This is considered the last great period in Egyptian history. You probably noticed that the Middle Kingdom ended about 1800 B.C. and the New Kingdom began about 1600 B.C. What happened to those 200 years in between? Did Egypt cease to exist? In a way it did. During this time, Egypt was conquered by the Hyksos, who had superior weapons. Eventually, the Egyptians began using these newer weapons as well and were able to win their country back from the Hyksos. Egypt was united once more, and the New Kingdom, sometimes called the Golden Age of Egypt or the Age of Empire, began.

Egyptian armies conquered Syria, Palestine, and the area west of the Euphrates River. Egypt became wealthy. Pharaoh Amenhotep IV forced the people to stop worshipping many gods and told them they should only worship one god, Aten, the sun god. He closed the temples of other gods and had workmen remove the plural word "gods" from buildings and from other structures. He was so devoted to the god Aten, he even changed his own name to Akhenate, which means "spirit of Aten." He created a new capital named Akhetaton, devoted to the god. When Akhenate died, Pharaoh Tutankhamen (Tut) restored the old gods and made Thebes the capital again.

Beginning in 1070 B.C., the Egyptian Empire began to decline. There was a civil war. Egypt also had to defend itself from many different invasions over these years. Egyptians fought the Hittites, the Lybians, the Nubians, and the "sea peoples," invaders from somewhere in the Mediterranean. Over a period of time, the Egyptians were invaded by the Assyrians in 671 B.C., the Persians in 525 B.C., Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., and the Romans in 32 B.C.



Artifact from King Tut's Tomb