

Old Kingdom Egypt

When Egypt was first unified around 3000 BC under a Pharaoh from Upper Egypt (the south), the Pharaohs quickly came to have a great deal of power over their subjects. Their capital was at Memphis (see map). Because it was so long ago, we don't have a lot of information about this time. It seems that the Pharaohs organized the first systematic irrigation from the Nile river, which allowed still more people to live in Egypt without starving. The Pyramids were built in this period as great tombs for the Pharaohs. Probably they were built by people who were usually farmers, like most people at that time. They may have been built a little at a time each year, during the Nile floods when people couldn't do farm work anyway. Recent archaeology suggests that the earliest Pharaohs also engaged in human sacrifice. About the same time, another great civilization was arising in Sumer.

Egypt in the First Intermediate Period

The end of the Old Kingdom, around 2600 BC, seems to have been caused by rebellions among the lower levels of the rich people, who believed that the Pharaohs had too much power. Gradually the Pharaohs had become more and more dependent on the government officials, and these men grabbed power. Some of the organization of the country collapsed. No more pyramids were built. Literary sources describe a time of anarchy, with noblemen and noblewomen working in the fields, men killing their parents, brothers fighting, and tombs being destroyed. Some people, like Brian Fagan, think this may have been brought on by a major climate change which brought drought conditions to Egypt.

Middle Kingdom Egypt

The Middle Kingdom was formed after a series of wars between the rulers of Upper Egypt (the South) and Lower Egypt (the North). The rulers of Upper Egypt won, and they reunified the country about 2000 BC, with the capital first at Thebes in the south, and then at a new city just south of Memphis. The Pharaohs of this period are not as powerful as before. They show themselves as taking care of their people, instead of as god-kings as in the Old Kingdom. They are the shepherds of the people now. The nomarchs (local officials) are powerful. In this period, Jerusalem, Jericho and Syria first came under Egyptian influence. There was a lot of trading with Byblos, near modern Beirut.

Second Intermediate Period Egypt

Around 1786 BC the Hyksos invaded Egypt, starting the Second Intermediate Period. The Hyksos, who were invaders from Western Asia, took over the eastern part of the Nile Delta (North-Eastern Egypt, the part closest to Asia), having their capital at Memphis. We still

aren't sure who the Hyksos were, but they seem to have been Amorites, who spoke a Semitic language (related to Hebrew and Arabic) and came from the area around Syria and Israel, an area which had traded extensively with the Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom. The Hyksos did very well for about a hundred years, but then (as in the First Intermediate Period) the southern rulers from Thebes again began to reconquer the north of Egypt. In these "wars of liberation," the brothers Kamose and Ahmose fought both the Hyksos and the Nubians, Africans who lived to the south, and succeeded in reuniting Egypt.

New Kingdom Egypt

With the reunification of Egypt by the southerner Ahmose (Kamose died before it was united) and the expulsion of the Hyksos, Egypt began a new period of prosperity under the 18th dynasty. At this time there was a great deal of trade with Western Asia, and Egyptian armies even conquered much of Israel and Syria, though they were constantly fighting the Hittites and Assyrians to keep control of it. Great temples were built all over Egypt. The Egyptian queens were very powerful at this time, and in 1490 BC one of them, Hatshepsut, became Pharaoh herself.

In 1363 BC there was a famous Pharaoh named Akhenaten, who built a new capital at Amarna and seems to have worshipped a new sun god, and developed new art styles. His wife was Nefertiti. He had no sons, and his successor was his son-in-law Tutankhamon. However, by 1333 BC the Pharaohs went back to the old religion.

In 1303 BC a new northern dynasty or family of Pharaohs took over, the 19th Egyptian dynasty. Their first king, Rameses, moved the capital back to Memphis in the north. Priests became very powerful. Fighting with the Hittites in Western Asia continued, but also a lot of trade.

The 20th dynasty Pharaohs, around 1200 BC, continued the same policies, and were all called Rameses. There were many attacks on Egypt, first from Libya to the west and then from West Asia, by a group that the Egyptians called the Sea Peoples. The Hittites were destroyed, though around 1100 BC the Egyptians fought off the Sea Peoples in a great naval battle. But the trouble in West Asia seems to have caused a general economic depression in the whole Eastern Mediterranean and West Asia, and soon afterwards the New Kingdom collapsed.

Egypt in the Third Intermediate Period

After the death of the last Ramses in 1085 BC, Egypt fell apart. We don't know exactly why, but there may have been a serious drought. The Hittite and Mycenaean cultures collapsed at the same time, and various people from that area invaded Egypt, where they were called the Sea Peoples - the Philistines, the Lycians, and the Achaeans, among others (possibly the Trojans). Egypt beat these Sea Peoples off, but Egypt collapsed soon afterward anyway. Egypt lost its control over Israel and Lebanon (this is the story of Moses) and was again ruled by different kings in the north and the south. Nubia got back its independence altogether, and had its own kings, and so did the Egyptian territories in Israel and Syria (this is the time of King David and King Solomon in the Bible). The north became richer than the south, and cities developed for the first time. But Egypt was weaker than usual, and the Libyans invaded several times, and ruled the north for a while. In the south, at Thebes, the priests of Amun continued to be very powerful. Around 715 BC, a black Sudanese (or Kushite) king from south of Egypt, named Piankhy, invaded and conquered most of Egypt and founded Dynasty 25 of the Pharaohs. (This might be a sculpture of Piankhy's successor, Shabaka)

This dynasty did not last long, because a new group in West Asia, the Assyrians, conquered Egypt in a series of wars ending in 664 BC and drove the Sudanese out of Egypt. The Assyrians could not really rule a land so far from their own capital at Nineveh, though, and soon another group of Libyan kings took over as Dynasty 26, with help from Greek and Lydian soldiers. These kings are called the Saites (sah-EETS), after their capital at Sais in the north of Egypt. By 609 BC the Assyrian empire was collapsing, and the Saite kings even managed to reconquer some of Israel and Syria. But in 605 BC the new Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar beat the Egyptians in battle and took Israel and Syria back. In 525 BC a new West Asian empire, the Persians, conquered Egypt, and this time they succeeded in ruling it.

Egypt under Persian Rule

The Persians ruled Egypt from 525 BC, successfully fighting off the Libyans. After the Greek victory at Marathon in 490 BC, the Egyptians revolted (in 484 and again in 460 BC) with the help of the Athenians, but unsuccessfully.

In 404 BC Egypt succeeded in becoming independent, thanks to Persian weakness, and established Dynasties 28, 29 and 30. Dynasty 28 was very short (only one Pharaoh!). In Dynasty 29, the Egyptians made an alliance with Sparta where Sparta would help Egypt against the Persians in exchange for a lot of wheat, but unfortunately the Persians captured the Egyptian wheat ships on their way to Sparta, so that didn't work out very well. (The Egyptians were dealing with the Spartans now instead of the Athenians because Athens was weaker after the Peloponnesian War). The Pharaohs of Dynasty 30 tried to re-establish Egypt as an independent country. They fought off Persian invasions. One time, the Persians had to go home because the Nile flooded when they were trying to invade. Like the other Pharaohs, they made alliances with Sparta and Athens and other Greek cities to try to keep off the Persians. Some of them even tried to put the New Kingdom back together by invading Syria. But in the end they couldn't keep fighting the Persians off. The Persians reconquered Egypt after sixty-three years, in 341 BC. But they didn't keep it very long. By 332 BC, Alexander the Great conquered Egypt as part of his takeover of the Persian Empire.

Egypt under Greek Rule

In 332 BC Alexander the Great conquered Egypt with a Greek army. At first the Egyptians thought he would make them independent again, but he did not. Alexander made Egypt part of his own empire. When Alexander died in 323 BC, his general Ptolemy (TA-low-mee) took over Egypt as his own territory. He and his successors (all called Ptolemy) ruled Egypt until the Roman Augustus conquered it from the last Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra in 30 BC. The Ptolemies succeeded in reconquering much of Israel and Syria. They brought Greek culture and the Greek language to Egypt, though ordinary people continued to speak Egyptian and worship Egyptian gods.

Roman Egypt

By the time of the Roman Julius Caesar, around 50 BC, the Ptolemies, the Greek kings of Egypt, were much weaker than the Romans. When Julius Caesar visited Egypt, the Ptolemaic (Greek) queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, begged him to help her fight a civil war against her teenaged brother and husband, Ptolemy. Julius Caesar did help her, but he left Roman troops all over Egypt, and also took Cleopatra (klee-oh-PAT-rah) back to Rome with him as his girlfriend. When Julius Caesar was assassinated in Rome in 44 BC, Cleopatra returned to Egypt with another Roman leader, Mark Anthony (who was also her boyfriend). In a civil war between Julius Caesar's nephew Augustus and Marc Anthony, Antony and Cleopatra were defeated. They killed themselves (or perhaps were killed) in 30 BC, and the Romans took over Egypt. The Romans valued Egypt very highly, because it was so fertile and produced so much food. A lot of food, especially wheat for bread, was taken from Egypt for taxes and sent to Rome on big ships. To make it easier to collect these taxes, the Romans also established Roman-style government in Egypt, though the main language of government was still Greek (the way it had been under Greek rule) rather than Latin. By this time even most ordinary people in Egypt knew some Greek. Around 300-400 AD, most Egyptians converted to Christianity. There were bitter battles over exactly which kind of Christianity, Arian or Catholic, would be observed in Egypt. When Rome fell to the Ostrogoths in 476 AD, Egypt's grain was sent instead to the new Roman capital at Constantinople, near the Black Sea, in what is now Turkey. The Romans held Egypt until about 700 AD, for about 700 years, until the Arabs conquered it.

Islamic Egypt

As part of the rise of the new religion of Islam in Western Asia, the Arabs established a new empire centered on Syria. They soon conquered Egypt as well, so that just as under the Assyrians and then the Persians, Egypt came under the rule of West Asia. Gradually most Egyptians converted from Christianity to Islam, and learned to speak Arabic (the remaining Christians in Egypt are called Copts). A new capital was established in the north at Cairo (KYE-row).

For a while around 1000-1300 AD, the Egyptians became independent of Asia under the Shiite Fatimid dynasty. This was a time of great achievements in Egypt. But then they were conquered by the Sunni Ayyubids, and then the Mamluks. Around 1500, Egypt became part of the Islamic Ottoman Empire, which held Egypt until modern times.

Egyptian Mythology

At first, there was only Nun. Nun was the dark waters of chaos.

One day, a hill rose up out of the waters. This hill was called Ben-Ben.

On this hill stood Atum, the first god.

Atum coughed and spat out Shu, the god of the air, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture.

Shu and Tefnut had two children. First, there was Geb, the god of the earth. Then, there was Nut, the goddess of the sky.

Shu lifted Nut up so that she became a canopy over Geb.

Nut and Geb had four children named Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys.

Osiris was the king of the earth and Isis was the queen. Osiris was a good king, and he ruled over the earth for many years.

However, everything was not well. Seth was jealous of Osiris because he wanted to be the ruler of the earth. He grew angrier and angrier until one day he killed Osiris.

Osiris went down into the underworld and Seth remained on earth and became king.

Osiris and Isis had one son called Horus. Horus battled against Seth and regained the throne.

After that, Horus was the king of the earth and Osiris was the king of the underworld.

The End