

Egypt
World History
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To the west of the Fertile Crescent in Africa, another river makes its way to the sea. While Sumerian civilization was on the rise, a similar process took place along the banks of this river, the Nile in Egypt. Yet the Egyptian civilization turned out to be very different from the collection of city-states in Mesopotamia. Early on, Egypt was united into a single kingdom, which allowed it to enjoy a high degree of unity, stability, and cultural continuity over a period of 3,000 years.

Egypt's settlements arose along the Nile on a narrow strip of land made fertile by the river. The change from fertile soil to desert—from the Black Land to the Red Land—was so abrupt that a person could stand with one foot in each. As in Mesopotamia, yearly flooding brought the water and rich soil that allowed settlements to grow. Every year in July, rains and melting snow from the mountains of east Africa caused the Nile River to rise and spill over its banks. When the river receded in October, it left behind a rich deposit of fertile black mud called silt. Before the scorching sun could dry out the soil, the peasants would prepare their wheat and barley fields. All fall and winter they watered their crops from a network of irrigation ditches.

The period from 2660 to 2180 B.C., known as the Old Kingdom, marks a time when pharaohs began to rule a united kingdom. The role of the king was one striking difference between Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamia, kings were considered to be representatives of the gods. To the Egyptians, kings were gods. Builders of the Pyramids Egyptians believed that their king ruled even after his death. He had an eternal life force, or ka, which continued to take part in the governing of Egypt. In the Egyptians' mind, the ka remained much like a living king in its needs and pleasures. Since kings expected to reign forever, their tombs were even more important than their palaces. For the kings of the Old Kingdom, the resting place after death was an immense structure called a pyramid. The Old Kingdom was the great age of pyramid building in ancient Egypt.

In contrast to the Mesopotamians, with their bleak view of death, Egyptians believed in an afterlife, a life that continued after death. People of all classes planned for their burials, so that they might safely reach the Other World. Royal and elite Egyptians' bodies were preserved by mummification, which involves embalming and drying the corpse to prevent it from decaying. Remember that Egyptians believed that there was an afterlife where a person would need their body, so it was important to preserve the body.

Like the grand monuments to the kings, Egyptian society formed a social class or social hierarchy pyramid. The king, queen, and royal family stood at the top. Below them were the other members of the upper class, which included wealthy landowners, government officials, priests, and army commanders. The next tier of the pyramid was the middle class, which included merchants and artisans. At the base of the pyramid was the lower class, by far the largest class. It consisted of peasant farmers and laborers.

In the later periods of Egyptian history, slavery became a widespread source of labor. The Egyptians were not locked into their social classes. Lower-and middle-class Egyptians could gain higher status through marriage or success in their jobs. Even some slaves could hope to earn their freedom as a reward for their loyal service. Women in Egypt held many of the same rights as men. For example, a wealthy or middle-class woman could own and trade property. She could propose marriage or seek divorce. If she were granted a divorce, she would be entitled to one-third of the couple's property.

As in Mesopotamia, the development of writing was one of the keys to the growth of Egyptian civilization. Simple pictographs were the earliest form of writing in Egypt, but scribes quickly developed a more flexible writing system called hieroglyphics. Although hieroglyphs were first written on stone and clay, as in Mesopotamia, the Egyptians soon invented a better writing surface—papyrus reeds. These grew in the marshy delta. The Egyptians split the reeds into narrow strips, placed them crosswise in two layers, dampened them, and then pressed them. As the papyrus dried, the plant's sap glued the strips together into a paper-like sheet. Language experts were not able to translate Egyptian hieroglyphics until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in the early 1800's. The Rosetta Stone is a tablet with Egyptian hieroglyphics and Greek writing on it, both telling the same story. Because language experts could translate the Greek, the Rosetta Stone helped them translate Egyptian hieroglyphics as well.

Since Egypt was a large country all along the Nile, the pharaoh often needed help to rule the country. The Egyptian government, therefore, was set up as a bureaucracy in order to keep order. A bureaucracy is when a leader has other members of government help him rule. In the case of Egypt, the pharaoh had a vizier or a prime minister that helped the pharaoh rule.

The Egyptian government was also a theocracy. A theocracy is when the leader is both a religious leader and political leader. The Egyptians believed that that pharaoh was the god Horus, making the Egyptian leaders have the ultimate form of divine right.

In about 1640 B.C., a group from the area of Palestine moved across the Isthmus of Suez into Egypt. These people were the Hyksos, which meant "the rulers of foreign lands." The Hyksos were able to dominate the Egyptians with new technology such as bronze weapons, compound bows and chariots. Eventually the Egyptians were able to learn how to produce the new technologies of the Hyksos and ended up returning to power in a period called the New Kingdom.

After overthrowing the Hyksos, the pharaohs of the New Kingdom (about 1570–1075 B.C.) sought to strengthen Egypt by building an empire. They wanted to control trade routes and hoped that they would become strong enough to avoid being conquered again. Equipped with bronze weapons and two-wheeled chariots, the Egyptians became conquerors. Among the rulers of the New Kingdom, Hatshepsut, who declared herself pharaoh around 1472 B.C., was unique. She took over because her stepson, the male heir to the throne, was a young child at the time. Unlike other New Kingdom rulers, Hatshepsut spent her reign encouraging trade rather than just waging war. Another pharaoh during the New Kingdom was Tutankhamen, who is well known for his tomb. Unlike all the other pharaohs, Tutankhamen's tomb was the only one that was not robbed before it was discovered in the 20th Century.