

II. A Summary of Ancient Egyptian History

People sometimes say that the ancient Egyptian civilization endured without much change for more than three thousand years. This is only partially true because, in fact, Egyptian ways of life, philosophy, religion, language, and art changed considerably over time. However, the ancient Egyptian culture retained its identity and general character to a remarkable degree over the course of its history—a situation due in part to Egypt's favorable and secure location. Essentially a river oasis, the country was bordered by deserts to the west and east, by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, and by the first cataract of the Nile at Aswan in the south. Egyptians were not isolated, however. Situated in the northeastern corner of Africa, Egypt was a center for trade routes to and from western Asia, the Mediterranean, and central Africa.

Life in the Nile Valley and in the broader Nile Delta was punctuated by the fairly predictable rhythm of the annual flood of the Nile between July and October, which was caused by heavy monsoon rains far south in Ethiopia. When the waters receded, depositing rich soils on the fields, planting and harvesting followed. The growing time was followed by a dry season of low Nile water until the floods rose again the next year. The Egyptians believed the inundation was a gift of the gods, and its regular appearance strengthened their confidence in a divinely regulated cycle of death and life.

The kingdom of Egypt is the most ancient known in Africa. In early prehistoric times people lived in separate groups along the Nile. With the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt and the introduction of writing (about 3100 B.C.) the recorded history of Egypt as a nation began. The kings of the thirty dynasties who ruled Egypt were believed to reign by divine right and with divine force.

Historians divide the history of ancient Egypt into the following periods: Prehistory (up to ca. 3100 B.C.), the Archaic Period (ca. 3100–2650 B.C.), the Old Kingdom (ca. 2650–2150 B.C.), the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1640 B.C.), the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 B.C.), the Late Period (ca. 712–332 B.C.), and the Ptolemaic (Hellenistic) and Roman Periods (332 B.C.–A.D. 395). At these times of prosperity the kings initiated numerous building projects and sent out expeditions to extend Egypt's borders and expand trade routes. During the so-called First, Second, and Third Intermediate Periods (ca. 2150–2040 B.C., ca. 1640–1550 B.C., and 1070–712 B.C.), the land was politically fragmented, often reverting to local rule in Upper and Lower Egypt.

After the end of the New Kingdom indigenous Egyptian dynasties were weakened by rival factions in Upper and Lower Egypt, and Egypt was subjugated at times by foreign invaders: Libyans, Assyrians, Nubians, and Persians. In 332 B.C. Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great, who was followed as ruler by his

general Ptolemy and Ptolemy's descendants. During the Ptolemaic Period (304–30 B.C.) Egypt entered into the Hellenistic world and later became a province of the Roman Empire following Egypt's conquest by Augustus Caesar in 30 B.C.

The People of Egypt

Many people wonder what the ancient Egyptians looked like. This is difficult to answer because of the time that has elapsed and the fact that all surviving images are works of art, not documentary representations. It is safe to say that among the large family of African nations, the Egyptians' physical appearance evolved in the particular conditions of the Nile Valley. Skin tones were most probably darker in the south than in the north, and overall darker than in the rest of the Mediterranean basin. Otherwise, the works of art indicate that the Egyptian population was "variety itself" (as stated by Gamal Mokhtar in *General History of Africa II: Ancient Civilizations*, UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa [Berkeley, 1981], p. 15).

Egyptian society was hierarchically structured. Every individual had a specific place in a system that ultimately depended on and answered to the king. In the early phases—known especially from sources of Dynasty 4—the highest offices were held by members of the royal family. Later many offices of state were hereditary among the elite class, and it was desirable for a son to follow his father in office. Indications of office and rank were provided by a person's dress, hairstyle, and accoutrements (staves, scepters, jewelry, etc.). Most office-holders also had a title, and high rank was indicated by a long list of titles before a person's name, some of them honorific.

The first and foremost qualification for office was the ability to read and write. With the "invention" of the hieroglyphic writing system and its handwritten counterpart, hieratic, the Egyptian state was administered by scribes; top office holders, including the pharaoh—even if they employed scribes for daily work—had to be literate. It has been estimated that roughly one percent of the population belonged to the literate class. The rest were predominantly employed in agriculture, with craftsmen, "slaves," and foreigners as a fraction of the remaining population. All these people worked in institutional establishments, mainly royal, state, or temple estates, but there was also private ownership of land. For their work people received pay in food and other material goods. Craftsmen often had special status and were able to make some income "on the side" by selling products on their own.

It is a matter of debate whether the term "slave" is quite right for those people (prisoners of war, criminals, or other unfortunates) who were bound to work for somebody without the possibility of leaving. These people were sold and bought, but they were not without legal rights and could own property and marry as they wished. Female foreigners from western Asia who were bound in this way often worked as skilled weavers; others were house servants. Nubians were mercenaries and policemen.

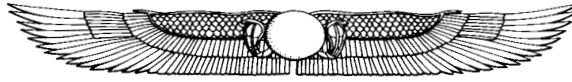
Landowners and production centers paid taxes to the state, mainly in goods, and all men were obliged to serve for a certain length of time (seventy-two days annually, according to one source) for the royal building projects, irrigation projects, or on expeditions that secured stone from the desert mountains.

The position of women in Egyptian society was generally secondary to that of men. As a rule they were excluded from high governmental and administrative offices, but there are exceptions. For instance, there were a handful of queens who ruled Egypt. A reigning queen was sometimes regent for a child king (usually her son) or successor of a king with no sons. The most famous, Hatshepsut, was senior co-regent with her nephew and stepson, Thutmose III. In addition to the royal role of some women, during the Old Kingdom women sometimes were overseers of storehouses of food and cloth. They were also tenant landholders or held office related to weaving, medicine, singing and dancing, and funerary cults, often in the service of upper-class women. By the Middle Kingdom female officeholders were rare, and in the New Kingdom women primarily held court titles such as one translated as "lady in waiting." In spite of the gradual disappearance of administrative titles among women, there is reason to believe that some women, especially in the New Kingdom, were able to read and write.

In all periods the most important public function of women was religious. In the Old and Middle Kingdoms many upper-class women were priestesses of Hathor and other (usually female) deities. In the New Kingdom, when the office of priest had become an exclusively male occupation, women served as musicians (playing the sistrum) in the temples of both gods and goddesses. One religious office held exclusively by women at Thebes was that of "god's wife of Amun" and "divine adoratrice." This became a politically important position during the Third Intermediate and Late Dynastic Periods, when the officeholder was always the daughter of a pharaoh and was at least the titular ruler of the Theban area.

In ancient Egypt women were above all wives, mothers, and "mistresses of the house." As such, they played a subordinate role to men in Egyptian society, and this is how they were predominantly depicted in art. In reliefs, paintings, and statues women are represented embracing their husbands (the opposite is extremely rare); they are usually smaller in stature than men (as is natural), but in some periods and circumstances they are much smaller, as when they sit beside their husbands' legs. In paintings and reliefs women sit and stand behind men, and when a monument, such as a tomb, is dedicated exclusively to a woman, her husband usually does not appear, perhaps to spare him the indignity of a secondary place.

Remarkably, the legal status of women in Egypt was essentially equal to that of men. They could act on their own and were responsible for their own actions. Women could own property and dispose of it at will; they could enter into contracts and initiate court cases; they could serve as witnesses, sit on juries, and witness legal documents. In this respect women in ancient Egypt were in a much better position than those in many other ancient cultures.



Historical Outline

Egyptians did not count time from one fixed point. Instead they based their chronology on the number of years each king ruled. The few surviving king lists are fragmented, omit certain controversial reigns, such as those of Hatshepsut and Akhenaten, and list several contemporaneously reigning dynasties (at times when the kingdom reverted to local rule in Upper and Lower Egypt) as if they reigned consecutively. Consequently, Egyptian chronology is far from exact. From 664 B.C. onward, however, the dating system can be related accurately to our calendar because of the mention of a solar eclipse in an Egyptian papyrus and correspondences with dated Greek and Persian sources. For the periods before 664 B.C. scholars continue to be engaged in lively debates about which exact dates best match available ancient sources. In books about ancient Egypt the reader will find dates that can differ by thirty or even fifty years. The following dates are those used in the Egyptian galleries by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

PREHISTORY

Predynastic Period
(late 6th–late 4th
millennium B.C.)

From early agricultural communities to urban settlements. Distinct differences between Upper (southern) and Lower (northern) Egypt, with the latter, in the earliest phases, showing affinities with North African cultures on the one side and western Asiatic on the other.

Protodynastic Period
(ca. 3300–3100 B.C.)

Lower Egypt increasingly infiltrated by Upper Egyptian culture, probably through trade that also included goods from Canaan. Rich cultural influences also from western Asia. Political unity achieved gradually by the spread of a uniform material culture and a series of conflicts rather than by one single conquest. Beginning of hieroglyphic writing. Some names of kings (Dynasty 0) are known.

ARCHAIC PERIOD

(ca. 3100–2650 B.C.)

Dynasty 1
Dynasty 2

At the beginning of Dynasty 1, Egypt unified under the rule of one pharaoh (mythical name: Menes; historical figures: Narmer and Aha). Capital at Memphis; mud-brick burial monuments of kings at Abydos; large tombs of officials at Saqqara. Great amounts of imported goods from Canaan and trade with Nubian so-called A-group culture, but also military raids into Nubia.

OLD KINGDOM

(ca. 2650–2150 B.C.)

Dynasty 3

The first major stone monument of Egypt, King Djoser's step pyramid (designed by architect Imhotep), built at Saqqara.

Dynasty 4

Pyramids of Snefru at Meidum and Dahshur. Pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure built at Giza. The sphinx cut from living rock at the side of Khafre's valley temple.

Dynasty 5

Mastaba tombs for royal officials at Saqqara and Giza continue from Dynasty 4, decorated with reliefs depicting scenes from daily life. Kings build pyramids (at Abusir) and sun temples. Trade with the Levant (Byblos) in sea-going ships.

Dynasty 6

Pyramids of kings at Saqqara; burial chambers since King Unas (last king of Dynasty 5) are inscribed with spells ("pyramid texts") to help king achieve rebirth in the after-life.

Power of provincial administrators increases. Relief decorated and painted cut-rock tombs at many provincial sites. Expeditions into Upper Nubia for central African goods.

FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD

(ca. 2150–2040 B.C.)

Dynasty 7 to early Dynasty 11

Weakening of central government. Period of climatic change to more arid environment. Food shortages. Provinces struggle individually. Herakleopolis Magna (at Faiyum entrance) in the north and Thebes in the south emerge as main centers of power.

MIDDLE KINGDOM

(ca. 2040–1640 B.C.)

Late Dynasty 11

King Mentuhotep II of Upper Egypt reunites the country with capital at Thebes. Monumental building projects resume in Upper Egypt, as does trade with nearby lands.

Dynasty 12

One of the great periods of Egyptian art and literature ("portraits" of kings and texts such as "The Story of Sinuhe," "The Eloquent Peasant," "wisdom texts," etc.). First king, Amenemhat I, relocates capital to the north at El Lisht. His pyramid and that of his son (Senwosret I) built at Lisht according to Old Kingdom prototypes. Later pyramids at Dahshur, Illahun, and Hawara. In the Faiyum new land made available for cultivation through irrigation. Lower Nubia conquered and forts built at the second cataract. Important gods are Osiris (at Abydos) and Amun (at Thebes). Imports from Minoan Crete.

Dynasty 13

During most of the dynasty administration continues as set up in Dynasty 12. Position of kings weakened by very short reigns. Asiatic foreigners settle in eastern delta and an important center for trade grows at Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a). Many imports from Canaan. Nubian forts are abandoned after middle of the dynasty.

Dynasty 14

Local rulers in the delta rule contemporaneously with rulers of late Dynasty 13.

**SECOND INTERMEDIATE
PERIOD (ca. 1640–1550 B.C.)**

Dynasties 15 and 16

Western Asiatic kings originating from foreign community at Avaris with strong ties to southern Canaan gain power over most of Egypt. They are called "chiefs of foreign lands" (in Egyptian *heka khasut*, or Hyksos). They adopt the Egyptian title of pharaoh, usurp earlier monuments, and make contacts with the kingdom of Kerma in Nubia.

Dynasty 17

Ruling dynasty of Thebes contemporaneous with the Hyksos. They acknowledge Hyksos as their overlords, but at the end of the dynasty King Kamose starts movement to expel the Hyksos. From this time onward, Egyptian military power is based on the use of horse-drawn chariots.

**NEW KINGDOM
(ca. 1550–1070 B.C.)**

Dynasty 18

King Ahmose reconquers Memphis and destroys Avaris, ending the Hyksos rule. Thutmose I reconquers Nubia, which becomes a colony of Egypt. Hatshepsut, important female ruler, sponsors fine works of art and architecture (Temple of Deir el-Bahri). Beginning with Thutmose III, Egypt becomes an empire controlling large parts of the Near East as well as Nubia. Time of a luxurious royal court with international tastes, especially under Amenhotep III.

In the Amarna period Akhenaten and Nefertiti break with the traditional religion in favor of the sole worship of the Aten (light). During their reign distinctive art is created and literature reflects a version of the language nearer to that actually spoken.

Tutankhamun restores worship of traditional gods. He leaves no royal heir. Haremhab becomes the last king of the dynasty. He completes the return to traditional religion and art and possibly names as successor Ramesses I, first ruler of Dynasty 19.

Dynasty 19

Great era of temple building. Campaigns in the Near East against the Hittites; peace treaty made with Hittites in reign of Ramesses II.

Dynasty 20

Ramesses III repels the "sea peoples" (dislocated tribes mainly from Asia Minor). Political decline and economic difficulties. Traditional time of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt.

THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD (ca. 1070–712 B.C.)

Dynasty 21

Egypt again divided; one dynasty rules in Nile Delta, sharing power with high priests of Amun at Thebes.

Dynasties 22–24

Egypt gradually further divided. In Dynasty 22 rulers of Libyan descent coexist with other contemporary dynasties. Throughout Dynasties 21–24 Egypt's international power wanes. Rule over Nubia collapses. Private tombs more modest; high artistic quality maintained most notably in decoration of coffins and in metal casting and inlay.

LATE PERIOD (7th–4th century B.C.)

Dynasty 25

Kushite rulers from Nubia invade and reunite Egypt. This drive from the south once again revives Egyptian art and architecture: great funeral "palaces" of high officials in Thebes; individualized images of high officials and Kushite kings. Assyrians invade and end Kushite rule over Egypt.

Dynasty 26

Assyrians withdraw. Kings from Sais in the delta rule Egypt. Greek settlements grow in significance; role of Greek mercenaries in king's army crucial. Important period of art: classicism and archaism.

Dynasty 27

Achaemenid Persians (who also threaten Greek city-states) invade Egypt and rule.

Dynasties 28–30

Last native rulers repel Persians. Dynasty 30 is brief (380–343 B.C.) but important period for Egyptian assertion of identity; in architecture and art basic concepts are initiated that establish what is Egyptian for centuries to come, influencing both Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. Persians invade again in 343 B.C., initiating the Second Persian Period (sometimes called Dynasty 31).

PTOLEMAIC PERIOD (332–30 B.C.)

In 332 B.C. Egypt is conquered by Alexander the Great (Macedonian Dynasty of mainland Greece [332–304 B.C.]). Upon his death, Greek general Ptolemy and his descendants rule. Important temples are built completely in Egyptian style. Many are preserved to this day (Edfu and Dendara).

ROMAN PERIOD
(30 B.C.—4th century A.D.)

Last Ptolemaic ruler, Cleopatra VII, and Antony defeated by Augustus Caesar in 30 B.C. Egypt conquered by Rome. Last great phase of temple building under Augustus (Temple of Dendur). Under rule of Roman emperors temples are still enlarged and decorated in Egyptian style. In other forms of art Greco-Roman elements are mixed with Egyptian ones. Mummy portraits (the "Faiyum portraits") are painted in Greek manner and technique but fixed to Egyptian-style mummies. Last datable hieroglyphic inscription is A.D. 394 at Philae sanctuary of Isis on island near Aswan.

