

# The **ESSENTIALS**<sup>®</sup> of **Ancient History**

**4500 B.C.E. – 500 C.E.  
The Emergence of  
Western Civilization**

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## CHAPTER 3

# EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION

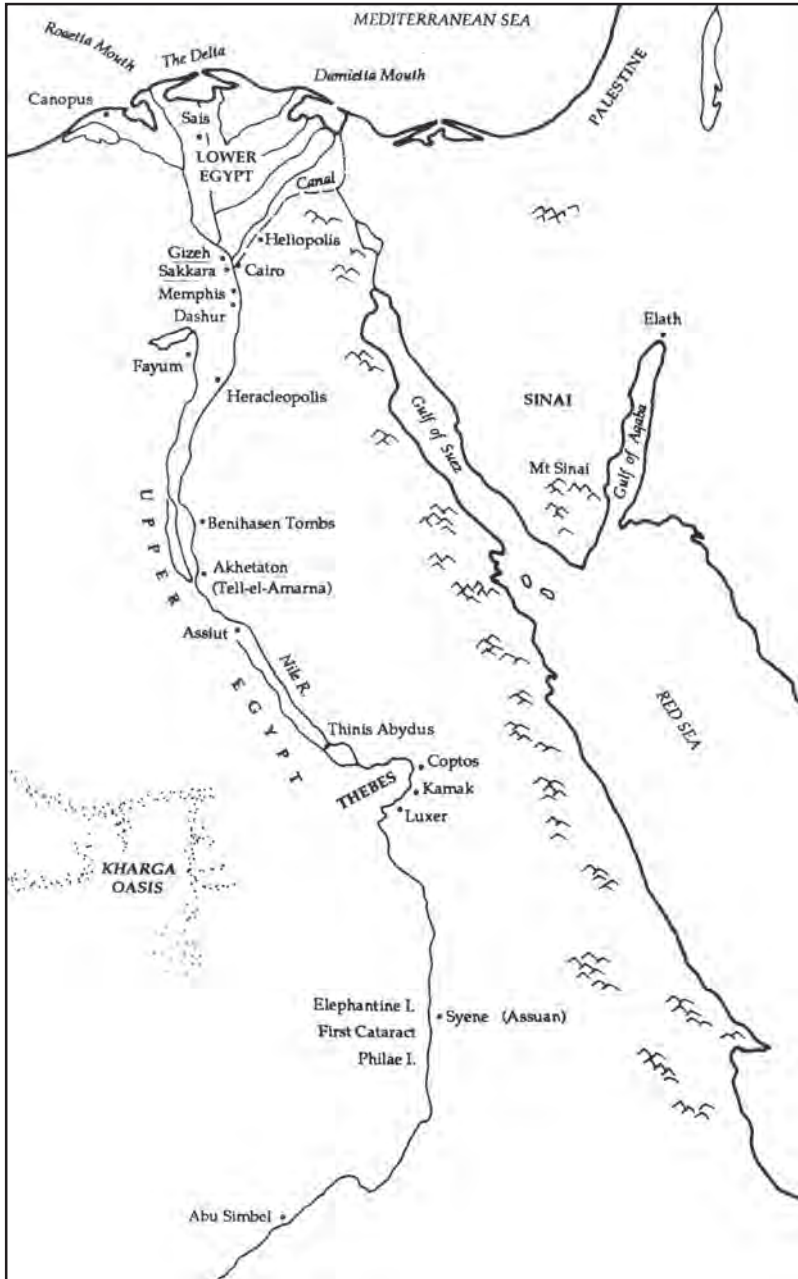
### 3.1 GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Geography and climate account for much of Egypt's stability in the course of 3000 years of ancient history. Herodotus, the Greek historian of the fifth century B.C.E., identified the determinant role that geography played in the region's history when he described Egypt as "the gift of the Nile." Rising 4000 miles to the south in Central Africa, the Nile runs its course northwards to the Mediterranean. Rapids (called Cataracts) make the river impassible at six points. The northernmost of these rapids (the First Cataract) lies 750 miles from the sea at Syrene (Aswan). This point marked the northern boundary of Upper Egypt, which ran six hundred miles to the south. Lower Egypt consisted of the final 150 miles of the river's course. In Lower Egypt the Nile breaks into channels resembling a triangle (called the Delta because of its similarity to the Greek letter "delta").

#### 3.1.1 *Contrast with Mesopotamia*

Egypt offers a sharp contrast to the inhospitable conditions present in Mesopotamia. The Nile does not flood erratically like the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Additionally, the soil is

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richer in the Nile valley, allowing two crops a year. Finally, whereas Mesopotamia possesses no natural barriers sufficiently formidable to invaders, Egypt is separated from potential adversaries by deserts in the west and east, equatorial jungles in the south, and the Mediterranean in the north.

## 3.2 OUTLINE OF EGYPTIAN HISTORY

Egyptian history divides into seven periods:

Archaic Period	5000 - 2685	B.C.E.
Old Kingdom	2685 - 2180	B.C.E.
First Intermediate Period	2180 - 2040	B.C.E.
Middle Kingdom	2040 - 1785	B.C.E.
Second Intermediate Period	1785 - 1560	B.C.E.
New Kingdom	1560 - 1085	B.C.E.
Post-Empire	1085 - 30	B.C.E.

### 3.2.1 *Archaic Period (5000-2685 B.C.E.)*

By 5000 B.C.E. prehistoric Egyptians had passed into the Neolithic Age. Agriculture was well-developed and copper was used to make tools. Sometime prior to 3000 B.C.E. the Egyptians invented a system of writing. Researchers believe that the Egyptian “hieroglyphs” (Greek for “sacred carvings”) were influenced by the Mesopotamians. There were more than 40 large settlements along the Nile’s course by 3000 B.C.E. Traditionally, Narmer or Menes is credited with unifying Upper and Lower Egypt. He is considered the first Pharaoh (“Great House”). The term *pharaoh* was not used by the Egyptians. This expression came into general usage because of the Bible.

### 3.2.2 *The Old Kingdom (2685-2180 B.C.E.)*

The Old Kingdom consisted of the first six dynasties of Egyptian rulers. During this period most of the traditions that

were to become characteristic of Egyptian life for the next two thousand years appeared. The king was considered a living god and held absolute power. During the Third Dynasty (ca. 2650 B.C.E.) the capital was moved to Memphis, just north of the beginning of the Delta. The pyramids were built during the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2613-2494 B.C.E.).

### **3.2.3 *The First Intermediate Period (2180-2040 B.C.E.)***

There are at least three reasons which account for the collapse of central government in the Old Kingdom. First, the expenditures necessary for projects such as the pyramids exhausted the state's revenues. Second, climatic disasters reduced the amount of grain, weakening the state. Finally, the nobility grew powerful and autonomous. During the First Intermediate Period, power reverted to the *nomes* (regional authorities).

### **3.2.4 *The Middle Kingdom (2040-1785 B.C.E.)***

This period of disorder and anarchy ended when a powerful noble family from Thebes subdued their rivals and established a new dynasty (ca. 2040 B.C.E.). The Middle Kingdom was one of brilliance. During the Twelfth Dynasty the Pharaohs undertook a massive land reclamation project at an oasis west of the Nile (The Fayum). Dams and reservoirs were constructed to insure adequate water supply throughout the year. The Thirteenth Dynasty (ca. 1785 B.C.E.), already weakened by a resurgence of the nobility, fell victim to external invaders.

### **3.2.5 *The Second Intermediate Period (1785-1560 B.C.E.)***

The invasion of Egypt by the Hyksos ("Rulers of Foreign Lands") marks a turning point in Egyptian history. Until 1700 B.C.E., Egypt had seemed impregnable. It is uncertain precisely what the origin of the Hyksos was. They brought three innovations: use of horses, chariots, and body armor. The Hyksos attempted to establish themselves as the rulers of Egypt. By

1560 they had either been driven out of Egypt or were enslaved.

### **3.2.6 *The New Kingdom (1560-1085 B.C.E.)***

The Hyksos invasion left a lasting impression on Egypt. The Egyptian sense of stability and security was shattered. Under the New Kingdom the Pharaohs followed a policy of expansion that saw them dominate Nubia in the south and send their armies into Palestine and Syria. Two new classes came into being: professional soldiers and slaves. It was during this period that the Jews fell under the Pharaoh's power. The Egyptian Empire reached its zenith by 1400 B.C.E. The Empire endured for four centuries. By 1085 B.C.E. the Egyptians had lost their Asian empire. Economic disasters ensued and the New Kingdom collapsed with the end of the Twentieth Dynasty.

### **3.2.7 *Post-Empire (1085-30 B.C.E.)***

Egypt was repeatedly invaded between 1085 and 30 B.C.E. The barbaric Libyans and Nubians were the first to attack. Between 663 and 525 B.C.E., Egypt was part of the Assyrian Empire. The Persians controlled Egypt between 525 and 325 B.C.E. Alexander the Great's armies conquered Egypt in 325 and made it part of his Empire. In 30 B.C.E. the Romans succeeded in bringing Egypt under their control.

## **3.3 POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHARACTER OF EGYPTIAN LIFE**

The pattern of Egyptian government was established in the Old Kingdom.

### **3.3.1 *Ma'at***

The Pharaoh possessed complete authority. The king ruled

as a living god. His chief responsibility was to rule according to “Ma’at.” Ma’at is an Egyptian concept that includes justice, right, truth, law, and order.

### **3.3.2 *Social Classes***

There were four classes in the Old and Middle Kingdoms: the royal family, nobles, middle class (including scribes, artisans and wealthy farmers), and the peasants. Throughout the Old and Middle Kingdoms the peasants made up the great majority of the population. The invasion of the Hyksos added two new classes: professional soldiers and slaves. Agriculture was the basis of economic life. The gap between the rich and the poor was tremendous. Family life was built on monogamous marriage though polygamy was permitted. Women could own property and the Egyptians were one of the few ancient peoples that allowed women to succeed to the throne (Queen Hatshepsut in the Eighteenth Dynasty).

## **3.4 RELIGION**

The Egyptian conception of religion was polytheistic. During the Archaic Period animism was widespread. Each village had its own pantheon of gods and spirits. The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt introduced a new stage in the evolution of Egyptian religious thought. In the Old Kingdom the Sun God, Re, emerged as the most powerful of the gods.

### **3.4.1 *Belief in an Afterlife***

The Egyptians were unique among ancient peoples in the emphasis they placed on life after death. Initially, they believed that the Pharaoh was the only person who was granted immortality. They conceived of death as an extension of life. This accounts for the elaborate preparations that culminated in the building of the pyramids. The Egyptians believed that it was

possible to preserve the Pharaoh's "ka" (vital spirit). The first pyramid (Step Pyramid) was designed by the architect and engineer Imhotep as the Pharaoh's stairway to heaven. In the Old Kingdom only the Pharaoh was granted immortality. In the Middle Kingdom the belief had grown to include everyone.

### 3.4.2 *Osiris*

During the Middle Kingdom Osiris, god of the underworld, attracted a wide following. Osiris was a vegetative god associated with the Nile. His followers believed that he had been murdered by his envious brother Seth. Seth killed Osiris because he coveted Isis, who was Osiris' sister/wife. Seth cut Osiris into pieces and threw them into the Nile in Upper Egypt. Horus, Osiris' dutiful son, collected the parts when they reached the Delta. Followers of the cult believed that Osiris was miraculously rejuvenated. His death and resurrection was taken as a guarantee of the possibility of an afterlife. The Osiris cult carried an ethical note. Funerary paintings from this period show the souls ("ka") being judged on the basis of how much good and evil the individual had done in his life.

### 3.4.3 *Monotheism*

The greatest innovation in the Egyptian conception of religion came in the New Kingdom during the reign of Amenhotep (1363-1347 B.C.E.). Amenhotep ("Amon rests") revolutionized Egyptian religious practices. He introduced the idea that there was a single god: Aton. He changed his name to Akhenaton ("Aton is satisfied") and commanded that the temples for the other gods be closed. Akhenaton moved his capital to El-Amarna, midway between Memphis and Thebes. The people did not worship Aton directly. They were instructed to worship Akhenaton as a living god who in turn worshipped Aton. Akhenaton's intolerance of the existing temples provoked a strong reaction. His successor, the boy king Tutankhaton,

changed his name to Tutankhamen shortly after his predecessor's death. The name change signaled the return to the worship of Amon and the pantheon of Egyptian gods.

## 3.5 SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

### 3.5.1 *Mathematics*

The Egyptians made fewer advances in mathematics than the Babylonians. They derived a better value for “pi” than the Babylonians but were unable to solve more than simple linear equations. Their number system was hampered because they possessed no notion of place-value.

### 3.5.2 *Astronomy*

There are no surviving records of systematic observations by the Egyptians that are comparable to the records kept by the Babylonians. Funerary paintings show that they divided the heavens into thirty-six constellations. The Egyptians devised a more accurate calendar than the Babylonians. They set the length of the year at 365 days based on twelve months with thirty days for each month. They added five intercalary days at the end of the year so as to keep the calendar tied to the solar year.

### 3.5.3 *Medicine*

In medicine the Egyptians produced notable advances. Medical papyri go back to 2000 B.C.E. These early texts present a “demon” theory of sickness. The disease is represented as being caused by an evil spirit. By 1600 B.C.E. medical texts reveal a considerable advance. The Edwin Smith Papyrus describes several dozen medical cases in detail. The physician makes a diagnosis, proposes a course of treatment, and makes a prognosis as to the probable outcome. Disease is treated as a purely natural phenomenon.

## 3.6 CONTRIBUTIONS OF EGYPT

Egyptian civilization bequeathed the idea of stability to subsequent civilizations. Practically, innovations like the invention of papyrus (a reed that was pressed together to form paper) insured that the records of the Egyptians would survive for future civilizations. The Egyptian belief in an afterlife and the funerary cult which developed around it were unique in the ancient world. The Egyptian conception of monotheism was short-lived and was never adopted by the people. The Hebrews, meanwhile, developed the idea of monotheism concurrently and, in contrast to the Egyptians, embraced it as the central tenet of their beliefs.

### CHRONOLOGY OF EGYPTIAN HISTORY (All dates are B.C.E. and approximate)

Dynasties I-II	3100 - 2685
Writing	before 3000
Old Kingdom (Dynasties III-VI)	2685 - 2180
Pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, Menkaure (Fourth Dynasty)	2613 - 2494
First Intermediate Period	2180 - 2040
Middle Kingdom (Dynasties VIII-X)	2040 - 1785
Second Intermediate Period	1785 - 1560
Hyksos invasion	1674
New Kingdom or Empire (Dynasties XVIII-XX)	1560 - 1085
Hashepsut	1490 - 1469
Amenhotep III	1402 - 1363
Akhenaten	1363 - 1347 ?
Ramses II	1298 - 1232
Battle of Kadesh	1287

Ramses III	1198 - 1167
Egypt Conquered by Esarhaddon, king of Assyria	671
Saite Period (Dynasty XXVI)	663 - 525
Egypt conquered by Cambyses, king of Persia	525
Egypt conquered by Alexander the Great	332
Egypt annexed by Rome	30



**Archaic Period, Dynasties I-III: *Step Pyramid, Imhotep, 2650 B.C.E.* Cut stone. Saqqara, Egypt.**



**Old Kingdom, Dynasties III-VI: *Pyramids of Menkaure, Khafre, and Khufu.* Pyramids, of which Khufu's was the largest, were started by him circa 2600 B.C.E. at Giza.**