

Ancient Egyptian civilization

Overview

- Egyptian civilization developed along the Nile River in large part because the river's annual flooding ensured reliable, rich soil for growing crops.
- Repeated struggles for political control of Egypt showed the importance of the region's agricultural production and economic resources.
- The Egyptians kept written records using a writing system known as hieroglyphics.
- Egyptian rulers used the idea of divine kingship and constructed monumental architecture to demonstrate and maintain power.
- Ancient Egyptians developed wide-reaching trade networks along the Nile, in the Red Sea, and in the Near East.

Early Egypt

Much of the history of Egypt is divided into three “kingdom” periods—Old, Middle, and New—with shorter intermediate periods separating the kingdoms. The term "intermediate" here refers to the fact that during these times Egypt was not a unified political power, and thus was in between powerful kingdoms. Even before the Old Kingdom period, the foundations of Egyptian civilization were being laid for thousands of years, as people living near the Nile increasingly focused on sedentary agriculture, which led to urbanization and specialized, non-agricultural economic activity.



Map of Ancient Egypt and the Mediterranean and Red seas. Land is beige and the habitable regions of Egypt are highlighted in Green (all along the Nile River and the delta that opens out to the Mediterranean Sea in the north). Lower Egypt is the northern region and Upper Egypt is the southern region of this map.

The areas in green show the habitable regions of Egypt. Note the locations of the Nile Delta, Upper and Lower Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, and Kush (Nubia). [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Evidence of human habitation in Egypt stretches back tens of thousands of years. It was only in about 6000 BCE, however, that widespread settlement began in the region. Around this time, the Sahara Desert expanded. Some scientists think this expansion was caused by a slight shift in the tilt of the Earth. Others have explored changing rainfall patterns, but the specific causes are not entirely clear. The most important result of this expansion of the Sahara for human civilization was that it pushed humans closer to the Nile River in search of reliable water sources.

Apart from the delta region, where the river spreads out as it flows into the sea, most settlement in the Nile Valley was confined to within a few miles of the river itself (see map above). The Nile River flooded annually; this flooding was so regular that the ancient Egyptians set their three seasons—**Inundation**, or flooding, Growth, and Harvest—around it.

This annual flooding was vital to agriculture because it deposited a new layer of nutrient-rich soil each year. In years when the Nile did not flood, the nutrient level in the soil was seriously depleted, and the chance of food shortages increased greatly. Food supplies had political effects, as well, and periods of drought probably contributed to the decline of Egyptian political unity at the ends of both the Old and Middle Kingdoms.

Although we do not know the specific dates and events, most scholars who study this period believe that sometime around the year 3100 BCE, a leader named either Narmer or Menes—sources are unclear on whether these were the same person!—united Egypt politically when he gained control of both Upper and Lower Egypt.

Somewhat confusingly, when you look at a map of this area, Lower Egypt is the delta region in the north, and Upper Egypt refers to the southern portion of the country, which is upriver from the delta. You may encounter this terminology when reading about rivers in history, so a good trick is to

remember that rivers flow downhill, so the river is lower toward its end at the sea and higher closer to its source!

After political unification, **divine kingship**, or the idea that a political ruler held his power by favor of a god or gods—or that he was a living incarnation of a god—became firmly established in Egypt. For example, in the mythology that developed around unification, Narmer was portrayed as Horus, a god of Lower Egypt, where Narmer originally ruled. He conquered Set, a god of Upper Egypt. This mythologized version of actual political events added legitimacy to the king's rule.

The use of **hieroglyphics**—a form of writing that used images to express sounds and meanings—likely began in this period. As the Egyptian state grew in power and influence, it was better able to mobilize resources for large-scale projects and required better methods of record-keeping to organize and manage an increasingly large state. During the Middle Kingdom, Egyptians began to write literature, as well. Some writing was preserved on stone or clay, and some was preserved on papyrus, a paper-like product made from reed fiber. Papyrus is very fragile, but due to the hot and dry climate of Egypt, a few papyrus documents have survived. Hieroglyphic writing also became an important tool for historians studying ancient Egypt once it was [translated in the early 1800s](#).



An example of New Kingdom hieroglyphics from the thirteenth century BCE. Four vertical columns of colorfully painted hieroglyphics on a white background depict birds, eyes, a crab, and pottery, among other images.

An example of New Kingdom hieroglyphics from the thirteenth century BCE. Image courtesy [British Museum](#)

As rulers became more powerful, they were better able to coordinate labor and resources to construct major projects, and more people required larger supplies of food. Projects to improve agricultural production, such as levees and canals became more important. **Irrigation** practices consisted of building mud levees—which were walls of compacted dirt that directed the annual flooding onto farmland and kept it away from living areas—and of digging canals to direct water to fields as crops were growing.

Elites, those individuals who were wealthy and powerful, began building larger tombs which were precursors to the pyramids. These tombs represented a growing divide between the elite and common people in Egyptian society. Only the wealthy and important could afford and be considered as deserving of such elaborate burials.



A mastaba, which was the typical grave marker for early Egyptian elites. Looks like a pyramid except lower to the ground and with a flat top instead of a pointed one.

A mastaba, which was the typical grave marker for early Egyptian elites. These were precursors to the pyramids. Image courtesy [British Museum](#).

Old Kingdom Egypt: 2686-2181 BCE

During the Old Kingdom period, Egypt was largely unified as a single state; it gained in complexity and expanded militarily. Old Kingdom rulers built the first pyramids, which were both tombs and monuments for the kings who had them built. Building **monumental architecture**—such as the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx in Giza, and temples for different

gods—required a centralized government that could command vast resources.



Great Sphinx of Giza (mythical creature with a human head and a lion's body) and the pyramid of Khafre. The tourists in the photo look like specks compared to these structures.

Great Sphinx of Giza and the pyramid of Khafre. The people in the photo give you a sense of how large the structure is! Image credit: [Boundless](#)

The builders of the pyramids were not enslaved people but peasants, working on the pyramids during the farming off-season. These peasants worked alongside specialists like stone cutters, mathematicians, and priests. As a form of taxation, each household was required to provide a worker for these projects, although the wealthy could pay for a substitute. This demonstrates both the power of the state to force people to provide labor and also the advantages enjoyed by elites, who could buy their way out of providing labor.

Egyptians also began to build ships, constructed of wooden planks tied together with rope and stuffed with reeds, to trade goods such as ebony, incense, gold, copper, and Lebanese cedar—which was particularly important for construction projects—along maritime routes.



Egyptian painting of a ship with passengers and crew.

Egyptian ship, circa 1420 BCE. Ships like this would have been used on typical trading voyages. Image credit: [Boundless](#)

Middle Kingdom: 2000-1700 BCE

The Middle Kingdom saw Egypt unified again as kings found ways to take back power from regional governors. From the Middle Kingdom era forward, Egyptian kings often kept well-trained standing armies. The ability of the Egyptian state to create and maintain a standing military force and to build fortifications showed that it had regained control of substantial resources.

Political fragmentation led to the Second Intermediate Period. The precise dates are unclear; even though writing allowed for more events to be recorded, most things still were not, and many more records have been lost or destroyed.

Taking advantage of this political instability in Egypt, the **Hyksos** appeared around 1650 BCE. They were a Semitic people, meaning they spoke a language that originated in the Middle East, which indicated that they were not native to Egypt. The Hyksos imposed their own political rulers but also brought many cultural and technological innovations, such as bronze working and pottery techniques, new breeds of animals and new crops, the horse and chariot, the composite bow, battle-axes, and fortification techniques for warfare.

New Kingdom: 1550-1077 BCE

Around 1550 BCE, the New Kingdom period of Egyptian history began with the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt and the restoration of

centralized political control. This period was Egypt's most prosperous time and marked the peak of its power.

Also in this period, Hatshepsut, Egypt's most famous female ruler, established trade networks that helped build the wealth of Egypt and commissioned hundreds of construction projects and pieces of statuary, as well as an impressive mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri. She also ordered repairs to temples that had been neglected or damaged during the period of Hyksos rule.



Photo of Hatshepsut's Temple at the base of a large rock formation. The temple is rectangular with three tiers and a wide ramp in the center. At the top tier, set furthest back into the rock formation, there are statues placed in front of columns. All of the columns and doorways are long and rectangular.

Hatshepsut's Temple. Image credit: [Boundless](#)

The term **pharaoh**, which originally referred to the king's palace, became a form of address for the king himself during this period, further emphasizing the idea of divine kingship. Religiously, the pharaohs associated themselves with the god Amun-Ra, while still recognizing other deities.

In the mid-1300s BCE, one pharaoh attempted to alter this tradition when he chose to worship Aten exclusively and even changed his name to Akhenaten in honor of that god. Some scholars interpret this as the first instance of **monotheism**, or the belief in a single god. This change did not survive beyond Akhenaten's rule, however.

New Kingdom Egypt reached the height of its power under the pharaohs Seti I and Ramesses II, who fought to expand Egyptian power against the Libyans to the west and the **Hittites** to the north. The city of Kadesh on the border between the two empires was a source of conflict between the Egyptians and the Hittites, and they fought several battles over it, ultimately agreeing to the world's first known peace treaty.



Map of Hittite (modern-day Turkey) and Egyptian empires in about 1274 BCE. Hittite empire is colored in red and Egyptian empire is colored in green.

Egyptian and Hittite Empires in about 1274 BCE. Kadesh is the city right on the boundary between the two. Image credit: [Boundless](#)

Third Intermediate Period: 1069-664 BCE

The costs of war, increased droughts, famine, civil unrest, and official corruption ultimately fragmented Egypt into a collection of locally-governed city-states. Taking advantage of this political division, a military force from the Nubian kingdom of Kush in the south conquered and united Lower Egypt, Upper Egypt, and Kush. The Kushites were then driven out of Egypt in 670 BCE by the Assyrians, who established a client state (a political entity that is self-governing but pays tribute to a more powerful state) in Egypt.

In 656 BCE, Egypt was again reunited and broke away from Assyrian control. The country experienced a period of peace and prosperity until 525 BCE, when the Persian king Cambyses defeated the Egyptian rulers and took the title of Pharaoh for himself, along with his title as king of Persia.