



## CHAPTER 2 | PHARAOHS AND PYRAMIDS

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter is devoted to the history of Egypt's rulers and their united nation. We will also discuss the role of pharaohs ("pharaoh" is the title of an Egyptian king—it means "great house"), history's first bureaucracy, and Egypt's barter system of economics. Finally, we will consider Egypt's largest achievements, which are also the largest man-made buildings on Earth: the pyramids.

First, however, let's remember the peculiar climate and geography of this long narrow nation, and the effects produced on Egypt as it developed into a united nation. Recall, for instance, that it was hot and sunny in Egypt, and that the country was flatland bordered by deserts on both sides, with Ethiopia's highlands to the south and the Mediterranean Sea (beyond the marshy Delta region) to the north.

There was plenty of mud and heat, but no forests, and the lack of timber as a natural resource led Egyptians from least to greatest to build houses from sun-hardened mud bricks. Also because of these arid conditions, Egyptian clothing was lightweight and white. Men primarily wore kilts; women wore simple, semi-sheer shifts. Both sexes wore wigs, which may have been designed as protection from the hot sun.

Because the Nile Valley had natural barriers (deserts and the ocean) that protected society from enemies, Egyptians developed as a peace-loving society that existed for thousands of years without needing to keep a standing army.

Because the Nile was used for transportation, Egyptians developed boats of varying, specific types. Many Egyptians enjoyed the river as a source of recreation. The Nile had useful plants—especially papyrus—that grew on the banks of the Nile, which Egyptians used in a number of creative ways, from making paper and thatching roofs to weaving sleeping mats.

There was great variety in the Egyptian diet: fish and water-loving animals flourished in the Nile, and farmers grew staple cereals and vegetables as well. (In Bible accounts, Egypt is always pictured as a land of plentiful and varied foods. See for example Numbers 11:5.)

This, then, was the land of Egypt. What sort of government might be expected to develop in such a land?

### LORD OF THE TWO LANDS

Kings have kingdoms, and in ancient times there were two kingdoms known as Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. The Nile Valley is the long green strip of land on either side of the river running through the desert, starting from the south (bottom of the map) and winding north (top of the map). This region was known as Upper Egypt. Before it reached the Mediterranean Sea, the Nile River split into seven smaller rivers spreading out like a fan, and this region is called the Nile Delta Region. It is also called Lower Egypt.

If it seems strange to you that the higher part of Egypt (on a map) should be called Lower Egypt, and vice versa, just remember that the Ancient Egyptians would have no such trouble because the waters of the Nile that they lived beside were flowing *down* from the Ethiopian Highlands to the Mediterranean Sea (which happened to be north of Egypt), and they couldn't help it that, on a modern map, north is "up"!



The first villages that archaeologists have located—found in both Upper and Lower Egypt—are more than 5,000 years old. Over time, the villages grouped together to form two separate kingdoms; also called Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt. We don't know a great deal about these early days, but we do know the king of Upper Egypt had a crown that was a white headpiece shaped like a cone or bowling pin. The king of Lower Egypt had a different crown: a red cylinder shaped like a hollow basket with no bottom.

*The two Egypts were different not only in geography, goddesses, and crown fashions, but also in language, occupations (and thus in the basis of their two economies), and worship. It's hard to see how they ever became one country!*

Upper Egypt	Lower Egypt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Upper Egyptians lived in the highlands, relatively isolated from foreigners. Thus, they distrusted outsiders and revered traditions.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Upper Egyptians were rich in stones and minerals of various kinds, which came to be important in building projects and pottery production.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Upper Egypt worshipped the vulture goddess Nekhbet.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lower Egyptians lived in the delta region, where there was much trading with peoples who ringed the Mediterranean. These Egyptians encountered new ideas, customs, and inventions, and were thus more progressive.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lower Egyptians had level, fertile grasslands for extensive farming and ranching. They produced plenty of vegetables and grazed cattle.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lower Egyptians worshipped the cobra goddess Wadjet.</li> </ul>

Because of the cultural differences between Upper Egypt and the more cosmopolitan Lower Egypt, those from Lower Egypt generally sneered at their more isolated and conservative southern neighbors as “provincial and closed-minded ‘country bumpkins’” (Art 20). What must their surprise have been when one of those “country bumpkins” made himself their lord and master!

No one knows the precise date, but sometime between 3,200 and 3,000 B.C., according to Egyptian tradition, Menes,<sup>1</sup> King of Upper Egypt (the Nile Valley nearer the Ethiopian Highlands), conquered Lower Egypt (the area around the Nile Delta). He united the two kingdoms and formed the first centralized Egyptian government with a new capital city named Memphis (near modern Cairo). Legend says that he also set up the first Egyptian irrigation system of canals, dams, and a manmade reservoir, to repurpose the Nile's floodwaters for farming.

Menes, they say, came from the city of Thebes in the more conservative Upper Egypt highlands. As conquerer, he could have been harsh to his new Southern Egyptian subjects. He could have enslaved them or belittled them (as, after all, they had belittled his people), while exalting Upper Egyptian culture. Wisely, Menes did none of those things. Instead, he chose to extend dignity to Lower Egypt, and he worked for real national unity. For instance, the crown that Menes adopted preserved distinctive elements of both of the two kingdoms while it showed their new unity. Menes established his new capital city (Memphis) at the junction of the two former kingdoms, rather than demanding that Lower Egyptians seek him in the traditional capital of Upper Egypt.

The Egyptians never forgot that their country had originated as two distinct lands, and there still existed, even when united, a sort of confederacy between those lands. In the Old Kingdom, the pharaohs were called “King of Upper and Lower Egypt,” which kept the dignity and distinctive qualities of the two kingdoms constantly in view. He even adopted a “double crown” of Egypt: a white cone inside a red cylinder, decorated with both cobra and vulture heads. It meant that the pharaoh was “Lord of the Two Lands” or “King of Upper and Lower Egypt.”

1. Some say that the first king who united Egypt was called Narmer, and others say that Narmer and Menes were the same man.



After Menes died, his son and then his grandson took over. “Dynasty” is the word for a group of rulers from the same family, and Menes’ family ruled over Egypt for a long time as the first Egyptian dynasty. All told, there would be more than 30 dynasties because, like its long and wiggly Nile River, Egypt had a long and wiggly history.

It might surprise you to know that the Lord of the Two Lands had not one or two but *six* crowns!

**Hedjet (White Crown):** The Hedjet was a tall, white, conical crown ending in a knob. A miniature vulture head attached at the front symbolized the goddess Nekhbet, often depicted as a vulture, and was sometimes worn with decorative feathers on each side to symbolize Ma’at, the goddess of truth. The Hedjet symbolized sovereignty and rule over the southern territories of Upper Egypt. Pharaohs often wore this crown during important rituals and ceremonies.

**Deshret (Red Crown):** The Deshret was a flat, cylindrical crown with a raised back edge that represented Lower Egypt. It symbolized the northern regions of Egypt and was associated with the goddess Wadjet, often depicted as a cobra. The Deshret signified the pharaoh’s dominion over the northern territories.

**Pschent (Double Crown):** The Pschent, also known as the Double Crown, was a combination of the Hedjet and Deshret. Menes adopted it so that the white crown of Upper Egypt was united with the red one of Lower Egypt in a show of both unity and co-equal diversity under the rule of a single pharaoh. The Pschent signified the pharaoh’s complete authority over the entire land.

**Khepresh (Blue Crown):** The Khepresh was a blue, helmet-like crown adorned with the royal cobra and often associated with warfare. It represented the pharaoh as a warrior king and was worn during military campaigns and battles. The Khepresh symbolized the pharaoh’s role as a protector of Egypt and its people.

**Atef Crown:** The Atef Crown was a white crown with ostrich feathers and two ram horns. It was associated with the god Osiris and symbolized the pharaoh’s connection to the afterlife and resurrection. The Atef Crown emphasized the pharaoh’s role as a divine ruler with the power to ensure life after death.

**Hemhem Crown:** The Hemhem Crown was a distinctive crown characterized by three sets of vertical lines that represented jubilation or excitement. It was associated with the god Horus and symbolized the pharaoh’s rule over both Upper and Lower Egypt. The Hemhem Crown also had an association with the creation and renewal of the cosmos.

**Nemes Crown:** The Nemes Crown was not a traditional crown, but rather a striped royal headcloth made of fine linen. It covered the pharaoh’s head and shoulders and was often associated with the god Amun. This crown is famously depicted in the iconic image of the golden mask of Tutankhamun.



## EGYPT'S GOVERNMENT

### The Role of Pharaoh

That is an interesting theory, and worth considering. The Egyptians believed that Pharaoh was the earthly incarnation (“incarnation” means “putting into flesh”) of one of their gods: Ra. When the pharaoh died, they believed that he mounted back up to heaven to rejoin Ra on the rays of the sun.

Because the Egyptians believed the pharaohs were an incarnation of a god—or else part-god and part-man— sent in human form specially to help and protect them. As a god-man, pharaohs were commonly believed to have the ability to intercede with other Egyptian deities (nature gods to whom they were believed to be divinely related) and thus to keep Egyptian cycles of farming and trading stable and prosperous. This was the basis of a pharaoh’s power.

Being regarded as a god on earth came with many responsibilities, but also some privileges:

Pharaoh’s Responsibilities	Pharaoh’s Privileges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> “He was the high priest of the land, and his main duty was to appeal through religious rites to the deities responsible for such natural events as the shining of the sun, the flooding of the Nile and the coming of spring” (Art 23).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pharaoh must maintain order throughout the land.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> He was responsible for the general welfare of all.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> “He regulated the labor of farmers, oversaw the building and maintenance of irrigation projects, and coordinated the collection of taxes” (Art 24).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pharaoh kept the peace through the administration of justice (this word in Egyptian = “what the Pharaoh loves”).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> He married a princess from within Egypt’s royal household.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pharaoh had many honorable titles given to him.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pharaoh’s commands were never questioned.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Everyone viewed it an honor to serve the pharaoh, and he would have eaten only the finest of foods, and had the best of all possible medical treatments.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> He was supposed to be an interpreter of the will of the other gods who ruled Egypt.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Received an education that included reading and writing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Everyone bowed before him and kissed the dust at his feet or (a rare privilege) his feet themselves.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> No one turned their backs on Pharaoh. They backed away with their faces towards him and eyes downcast.</li> </ul>

Naturally, Egyptians also believed that the pharaoh’s leadership and wisdom were more than mortal! Egyptians early on believed that a pharaohs’ wisdom and leadership in all areas—building, war, justice—were to be followed absolutely, since as demi-gods or even agents of the gods, pharaohs were greater than other, merely mortal, men. Pharaoh was the ultimate authority, the man who could make no mistakes, and his word was absolute. Obedience and service to the pharaoh were even seen as requirements for a good life after death.

Of course, nothing lasts forever, and neither did the Egyptians’ belief in their pharaohs’ power. Over time, as nobles, civil servants, and priests gained sophistication and power (at different times over Egypt’s long history) there were palace intrigues that undermined beliefs in the pharaoh’s powers. The people found their pharaohs could make mistakes or be defeated, and the Egyptians’ belief in their pharaohs’ power was



to become more and more tempered. However, despite the diminishing aspect of pharaohs' authority over time, Egyptians generally held to the beliefs that the gods would be displeased if pharaohs were disobeyed, attacked, or overthrown. Such displeasure would then mean the ruin of Egyptian prosperity. It was this basic belief that perhaps helped to keep Egypt as traditional and unchanging as it was for millennia.

In general, pharaohs tended to rule responsibly and well, with an eye to the good of the country. Their centralized rule as divine god-kings also seems to have given the society a strong degree of stability.

### Bureaucracy

Every major civilization—and most of the minor ones—developed some form of bureaucracy to govern its citizens. Egypt was no exception, and it is credited (or blamed) by many for being one of the originators of the institution. When the Upper Kingdom and Lower Kingdom of Egypt became united, the pharaohs started by doing all management tasks needed—and that is where the pharaohs ran into a big problem.

In theory, the pharaoh was a god on earth and absolute ruler of the whole of Egypt. He was the supreme military commander, chief religious figure, and responsible for keeping order along the whole length of Egypt from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea to the rapids of the First Cataract. In reality, he was one finite man who couldn't be everywhere, doing everything necessary, all at the same time. As Egypt grew and prospered, so did the pharaoh's responsibilities, until they were far too many for any one man. No one could adequately answer all questions and make all decisions for all the villages and towns and cities scattered along 4,000 miles of Nile River!

Thus, Egyptians invented what the French later described as a bureaucracy—an organization of officials in a government which enables and oversees its finances, works, enforcement, etc. Such officials are called “bureaucrats.”

The word “bureaucracy,” by the way, is a blending of French and Greek root words. *Bureau* means ‘desk’ in French, while *-cracy* comes from the Greek word *kratos* meaning “rule”—political power. Literally, the word means “desk ruler.” It was invented in the middling 1700's, by a French economist, Jacques Claude Marie Vincent de Gournay, who was frustrated by the administration of the French government at the time.

Egyptian farming villages had early developed loose local and regional hierarchies (organizations of authority), so perhaps it seemed natural to the Egyptians to form history's first large-scale bureaucracy to take some off the responsibilities off the pharaoh's shoulders, and to enforce the pharaoh's decrees. Without such a management system, civilizations must remain small; with one, as we shall see, Egypt became larger and even more prosperous.

The pharaohs divided Egypt into forty-two administrative states, called “nomes.” Each was governed by a “nomarch.” The borders of nomes came from the days when ancient Egyptians lived in independent villages and cities along the Nile before Menes united Lower and Upper Egypt into a single nation. There were twenty-two nomes in Lower Egypt and twenty nomes in Upper Egypt. These functioned much like the states of the United States, each being more or less independent from their neighbors. They owed an overarching loyalty to the pharaoh. Those who held positions in the civil government (from pharaoh's



second-in-command, the vizier down through the nomarchs, nobles, generals, soldiers, auditors, and inspectors) were responsible for administering bureaucratic duties within the nomes.

In addition to basic government work that we might be familiar with today, the pharaoh owned a great deal of land and many means of production—such as workshops—where finished goods were created by artisans of all kinds. The grain that he collected in taxes went to pay the wages of his officials, soldiers, artisans, and farmers. Some dynasties fell when they failed to meet their obligations, especially if the Nile flooded too much or too little and caused a famine, inciting rebellion among their hungry subjects.

The other major bureaucratic element of ancient Egypt was religious: the priests, scribes, and temples. The priests and temples served as centers of worship for the thousands of Egyptian gods, so of course they had a great deal of administration to do. The pharaoh was the most important religious leader and figure in Egypt, the chief priest. But each god or goddess had their own following. Not every deity had a temple, but the major ones might have several, as well as a whole priesthood devoted to worshipping them.

Scribes learned their trade in temple schools established and run by the priests. They kept the multitude of records necessary for all the administrative duties: crops sown and gathered, court proceedings, land ownership, legal and marriage contracts, and the daily activities of government officials. They recorded and preserved the history of their nation, and they recorded spells or prayers or hymns of praise to the gods and their rulers.

The scribes were the backbone of the ancient Egyptian bureaucracy. Since they already had records concerning the land, it was an easy step from there to keep track of how high the Nile flooded, how many sacks of grain were sown or harvested, and a wealth of other administrative details.

The annual flooding of the Nile must have provided plenty of work for scribes because it erased most of the border markers for the ancient Egyptians' fields. To keep things straight, the Egyptians developed a solid understanding of geometry and surveying as they remarked the boundaries of their land and fields each year. Keeping an accurate account of who owned what was essential for this task, which, fortunately, they could do since they had papyrus and hieroglyphs to record those details.

From a practical perspective, the temples also had significant responsibility for storing grain and other goods collected from the surrounding region in granaries and treasuries. These were under the ultimate authority of the pharaoh and were distributed according to his command. Many temples also acquired land as donations from pious Egyptians and ran profitable farms or workshops. The temples often raised herds of cattle, goats, sheep, and fowl. They rented or farmed their lands for crops. They employed craftsmen, much like the king to produce valuable goods for sale. Some even raised animals specifically for the purpose of turning them into pet mummies to be buried with ancient Egyptians.

Undertaking major projects, such as constructing pyramids, building cities, storing and distributing grain, or creating irrigation infrastructure required centralized planning and proper allocation of labor and supplies. The vizier (second-in-command to the pharaoh) was the chief bureaucratic official, responsible for overseeing most of the details of daily governance. In addition to building projects, he oversaw the courts,





treasury, archives, military matters, granaries, expeditions for acquiring far off resources, and trade. He had assistants to help him with all these works, of course, but his responsibilities demonstrate the scope and complexity of the ancient Egyptian bureaucracy.

The position of vizier was likely to be given to trusted relatives of the pharaoh, so you can imagine what a shock it must have been when Joseph, the young foreigner, was given that role! He certainly performed it well. Not only did he store up the seven years of good harvest so that the Egyptians survived the great famine, but he also administered the transference of the Egyptians' livestock, land, and even themselves to pharaoh in return for grain (Genesis 47:13-26). By the end of the famine, the pharaoh was the uncontested owner of all Egypt. You can see why it required a pharaoh who did not know Joseph to enslave and oppress the Hebrews—a basic sense of gratitude should have been sufficient to keep Joseph's descendants from forced enslavement.

Think also about the glory of Egypt and the power available even to adopted relatives of Pharaoh through an institution like a bureaucracy—and then consider Joseph's four-hundred-years-removed relative, Moses. Moses might never have been the pharaoh, but as a prince he probably would have had important jobs, lots of money, and a big house to live in. He gave it all up to try and protect the oppressed Israelites. He killed an Egyptian slavedriver and fled to the desert, where he wound up a poor shepherd in Midian.

The Diary of Merer illustrates, in part, how bureaucrats kept track of everything. Merer kept a detailed log that he filled in twice a day, which accounted for the activities of himself and the forty boatmen under his command. He recorded their progress, their departures, the type of labor that they accomplished in a systematic format that was likely standard throughout Egypt. Although he only played one small part, the cumulative efforts of ancient Egyptian bureaucrats resulted in dozens of pyramids, hundreds of temples, and thousands of miles of irrigation that created the most powerful civilization of its time. Certainly, it can lay claim to being one of the longest lasting civilizations in human history.

Ultimately, the pharaoh was believed to be responsible for creating and maintaining order throughout Egypt. His officials and priests more or less did his bidding, but if they failed then the fault was his. Strong pharaohs were usually successful at increasing the prosperity and territory of Egypt, while weak ones failed to thrive and the land often fell into chaos, sometime enough so that a new dynasty arose to replace the old, ineffective one. At the end of the day, the bureaucracy always survived in some form, serving whichever pharaoh next rose to power.

### The Role of the Nile

Egypt's bureaucracy and general administration were aided by the Nile River. As we saw in Chapter 1, the river flowed from southern highlands to the northern delta, but the prevailing winds blew from north to south. To take goods north, one simply had to drift with the current, or (to go faster) row. To go back to the south, one hoisted a simple sail for propulsion. This ease of navigation must have been a great help to Egypt's bureaucracy, for it ensured fast and reliable movement of inspectors, taxes, goods, messages, and all the little moving parts on which a bureaucracy depends for success.



## Economics

The Egyptian economy was a barter economy. This means that if a farmer wanted to pay taxes, he would offer game, or oil, or crops instead of using money.<sup>1</sup> Such produce was stored in central warehouses, and then the pharaoh's officials would pay for labor with them. Unfortunately, barter is a clumsy means of exchange that does not work well at a national level. Money is far more convenient.

You see, in a modern economy, we use money to represent value. For example, everyone understands and agrees that one dollar is one dollar. Whether dealing with taxes or bananas or donkeys or broccoli or shoes or games or goldfish, everything can be valued against the common standard of the dollar, which makes it very easy to understand how much anything is worth.

In a barter system, however, buying is much more complicated. For example, if I have an extra donkey and want a goldfish, which you have, then I have to hope that you want a donkey. If you want a game instead, then I'm out of luck unless I find someone with a game to sell. But if the game maker wants bananas and shoes, then I have to find two more people, one who's selling shoes and another selling bananas. Fortunately for me, the king this year wants me to pay my taxes in shoes, since his soldiers need new ones. Meanwhile, my neighbor, a farmer, really wants my extra donkey, but all he has to offer in trade is 500 pounds of broccoli. I happen to know that the teacher in the school believes that broccoli is exactly what children must eat or they won't learn. The shoemaker has seven children going to the school, so he always needs more broccoli. But the banana merchant hates broccoli and won't touch it!

So, to get a goldfish, I have to trade my donkey for broccoli from the farmer. I then trade 200 pounds of broccoli for shoes, so that the cobbler can send his kids to school. I pay my taxes with half of the shoes. I then trade some of the shoes to the banana merchant since he also has to pay his taxes in shoes. Taking the bananas and my last few pairs of shoes, I visit the game maker. Once I've traded for the game, I can at last pick up my beloved goldfish. Now I just have to figure out how to eat 300 pounds of broccoli before it goes bad!

As can be seen from this example, it would be much simpler to sell my donkey for \$900 and buy a goldfish for \$0.31; then I can pocket the change, \$899.69, to be used for buying anything else I need or want. I don't have to figure out how to trade, swap, bargain, or eat 500 pounds of broccoli.

Ancient Egyptians didn't have money, so they got good at bartering instead. Over the centuries, the ancient Egyptians were able to figure out what kinds of things pretty much everyone wanted most of the time. "Commodity" is the word we use for things that people want to trade. In ancient Egypt, commodities included oil, copper, linen or cotton cloth, and grains such as wheat, emmer, and barley. Most of the time, most people were willing to trade whatever they had for sale for one or more of these goods.

After experimenting, the ancient Egyptians found that grain was the most commonly desired commodity. Grain was easily stored and measured. The pharaohs usually required that taxes be paid in grain. They built grain silos and store cities—whole towns devoted to collecting, storing, and distributing supplies—throughout Egypt. Other commodities were useful and exchangeable, but grain was likely the most common point of reference for ancient Egyptians.

1. *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt* *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt, 4th ed.*, by Suzanne Strauss Art (Wayside Publishing, 2013), p. 16.





The following quote is a translation from set of ancient Egyptian papyrus scrolls that were discovered in the rubble of a tomb for a servant named Meseh. He served the Vizier Ipi, who lived during the early part of the Middle Kingdom. We think that the scrolls must have been accidentally dropped and lost by their owner while building a ramp. Remember that ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs didn't use vowels, so we are forced to guess at how their words were pronounced. When you see letters in parentheses (nnk-sw or Hw.t-hAA, for example) those are the exact literal translation of the hieroglyphs. Egyptologists add in vowels as best they can to make it pronounceable!

“Furthermore behold, 15 sacks of emmer are in the possession of Nenek-su (nnk-sw) at Hut-haa (Hw.t-hAA) and 13 (sacks ?) and 5 (bushels ?) of Lower Egyptian barley are in the possession of Ipi the Younger (jpi-Xrd) at Yusebek (jw-sbk). That which is in the possession of Neher's (nHr) son Ipi (jpi) at Sepat-mat (spA.t-mA.t) (amounts to) 20 (sacks of) emmer and (in the possession of) his brother Desher (dSr) 3 (sacks). The total is 38 (sacks of emmer and) 13 (sacks) and 5 (bushel ?) (of Lower Egyptian barley). Concerning anyone who will give me oil in payment - he shall give me 1 hbn.t-jar for 2 (sacks) of Lower Egyptian barley or for 3 (sacks) of emmer.”

From the last sentence of the quote, you can see how Heqanakht, the author, was willing to trade one jar of oil for two sacks of Lower Egyptian barley or else three sacks of emmer. In other sections of these scrolls, he discusses renting farmland in return for cloth as well as having given a specific amount of copper to rent another field.

Even though they didn't have money, the ancient Egyptians were able to trade, rent fields, collect or pay taxes, pay servants their wages, and support their families. Unlike money, however, grain had a limited shelf life. In one passage, Heqanakht complains about getting old barley and blames his trading partner for keeping the new—better—barley for himself. By contrast, money can be passed around thousands of times without losing any value.

## Technology and Art

Egyptian civilization is best known for the technological and architectural wonder of its pyramids, which you shall read about in this chapter. However, the first bureaucracy and the pyramids are not the only remarkable Egyptian achievements. They also invented the water clock and the *shaduf* (a simple kind of crane that worked on a level with a counterweight). They designed several types of boats made of papyrus or wood, invented a kind of paper (papyrus) and developed distinctive metalworking, pottery, and weaving. They took astronomical observations, developed the medical art of embalming (more on that later), and created a base-ten number system *long* before Napoleon thought of the “decimal system.”

Egyptians were also skilled in language and the arts. They invented a kind of picture-language generally called Egyptian hieroglyphics. In this language, they wrote poetry, histories, wisdom literature, spells, prayers, and hymns. They even buried important members of Egyptian society with a copy of a book that we now know as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (their title for it was a bit more hopeful—*The Book of Coming Forth By Day*). This book contained prayers, spells, and instructions to help guide the souls of the dead through the ordeal of enemy spirits and divine judgment and into a favorable afterlife. Spells and histories and hopes for the afterlife were also written, carved, or painted onto tomb walls.



Hieroglyphs could be simple or ornate depending on the space, purpose, and artistry of the creator. For example, among tomb writings, you might often see a squared oval with a horizontal or vertical line of writing inside. These were called “cartouches.” The cartouche developed from another symbol, the *shen* ring, which used a rope with horizontal ends forming a line to represent eternal protection. Hieroglyphics could be written vertically or horizontally, and in either case the line would indicate the “bottom” of the cartouche. Only pharaohs used the cartouche symbol (their names were too sacred for ordinary writing), which was meant to separate and protect both of their names—the ruling name and the personal name.

The word cartouche is French for a paper powder cartridge (bullet), but the ancient Egyptians would have called that hieroglyph a *shenu*. In 1798, Napoleon took a French army to Egypt on a three-year campaign to protect French interests in the region. While in Egypt, the soldiers saw various hieroglyphs on monuments and ruins. They saw a symbol consistently appearing, which they called *cartouche* since it resembled the paper cartridges that their bullets were wrapped in. The term stuck, and to this day Egyptologists use it to describe this particular hieroglyph.

The Egyptian art that has survived is mostly found in tombs and temples, so it reflects the most “grand” and “serious” of Egyptian artistry in painting, sculpture, relief carvings, jewelry, pottery, and architecture.

Egyptian art aimed to capture the essence of eternal truths in a “timeless” manner. For that reason, scholars believe, Egyptian figures are stylized as “static” (motionless) with frontal or profile views that show their essential features. A hierarchical scale was commonly used so that pharaohs and gods and the socially important were shown as larger than other figures of lesser rank.

Painted scenes, being found in tombs, unsurprisingly show the deceased’s life (including leisure activities such as feasts, games, or relaxation in a garden), accomplishments (including wars or famous hunts), and the journey to the afterlife. Egyptian art is also full of symmetry and color symbolism. Symmetry represented balance and stability. Colors represented a variety of things:

- ❑ Red: Red was associated with life, vitality, and rebirth. It was also linked to the sun god Ra and the life-giving properties of blood. Red was used in depictions of the skin and clothing of gods, pharaohs, and important individuals.
- ❑ Green: Green represented fertility, growth, and regeneration, often associated with the fertile lands along the Nile River. It was linked to Osiris, the god of agriculture and the afterlife, as well as to the concept of rebirth.
- ❑ Blue: Blue symbolized the heavens, eternity, and the divine. It was connected to the sky, the primeval waters, and the protective qualities of the goddess Hathor. Blue was often used for jewelry and amulets, signifying protection and spiritual significance.
- ❑ White: White was associated with purity, clarity, and divine light. It represented cleanliness and the spiritual realm. White was used for clothing, mummy wrappings, and sacred objects, symbolizing the connection between life and the afterlife.
- ❑ Black: Black was linked to death, the underworld, and the fertile silt left by the Nile’s annual flooding. It was also associated with the goddess Isis and her protective and magical qualities.



- ❑ Gold and Yellow: Gold and yellow symbolized the sun, divinity, and eternal life. They were often used to represent the skin, jewelry, and attributes of gods and pharaohs. The use of gold leaf and gold paint emphasized the radiant qualities of the divine.
- ❑ Brown: Brown represented the earth and the natural world. It was often used for depictions of animals, plants, and the landscape.

Common Egyptian symbols included the ankh (resembling a cross with a loop at the top, often interpreted as the key of life or the symbol of eternal life), the scarab beetle (symbol of transformation, rebirth, and protection) the Eye of Horus (a protective symbol associated with healing, restoration, and divine power) the djed pillar (a tall column with top crossbars, symbol of stability, endurance, and resurrection), the lotus and Papyrus Plants (decorative motifs symbolizing the papyrus as growth and vitality while the lotus represented rebirth, purity, and creation) the shen ring (a circular symbol with a loop at the top, often used to encircle the name of a pharaoh or a deity, representing protection, eternity, and the unbreakable cycle of time), the tjet knot (resembling a looped knot, symbolizing life, security, and protection), and the Ma'at feather (symbolizing the principle of truth, justice, balance, and order in the universe).

Egyptian art is very beautiful, and it has inspired at least two major “revivals” of Egyptian-styled furniture, decorations, clothing, cosmetics, and jewelry.

## OLD, MIDDLE, AND NEW KINGDOMS

Egyptologists—people who study Egypt—identify three Egyptian kingdoms that span 1500 years: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. To put things into a bit of perspective, the “New” Kingdom ended before David (in the Bible) fought Goliath or took the throne of Israel. Egypt finished off fifteen centuries of monarchy before Israel even got started! There was a civilization of sorts in Egypt well before the Old Kingdom, and stormy “intermediate periods” of a century or more between each of the three kingdoms. For thousands of years, Egypt was the mightiest power in the known world: so much so that Egypt became the Old Testament symbol for worldly pride and human achievement.

### The Old Kingdom (c. 2686 - 2181 B.C.)

#### *The Short Version*

Each of the kingdom periods of the Egyptians had their own achievements. The Old Kingdom saw the building of massive pyramids at Giza and the development of centralized bureaucratic government. Their prosperity encouraged trade, and the Old Kingdom Egyptians sent out many expeditions. They also made advances in architecture, engineering, and science. Technologically, the Old Kingdom was part of the Copper Age, so they knew how to make and use copper tools.

The Egyptians of the Old Kingdom also began to develop a unique system of picture-writing called hieroglyphics. They used this system to cover the insides of tombs and pyramids with symbols and to write hundreds of spells that were supposed to help the deceased to access a blessed afterlife.

Building and maintaining immense pyramids progressively drained the pharaohs’ treasuries. At the same time, fewer and fewer taxes were actually being collected for those treasuries because upper class people found loopholes in the tax system that allowed them to avoid paying! Finally, the prosperity of the kingdom meant that it grew numerically. Ruling over a large and widespread population, pharaohs had to depend more and more on bureaucrats.



Positions in the government began to pass from father to son, rather than by the pharaoh's appointment, and, therefore, men in power grew less dependent on pharaohs. Once they had power, the bureaucrats were often more interested in using it to benefit themselves than the state. Instead, government officials grew jealous of their positions and independence, and arrogant towards their pharaohs, which undermined pharaoh's power. Eventually, the pharaohs' authority weakened during Dynasties V and VI.

Towards the very end of the Old Kingdom, natural disaster in repeated famines gave rise to questioning by even common people of why they should follow a pharaoh who was not doing his job—safeguarding the general prosperity by pleasing the gods! After several years of inadequate Nile flooding, food became more scarce, the centralized government could not hold and things fell apart as the nobles (aided by priests) rose up in civil war against the authority of the pharaohs. The Old Kingdom had fallen.

### *The Longer Version*

Dynasties I and II ruled before the Old Kingdom. The Old Kingdom (Dynasties III-VI), also known as the Pyramid Age, saw the building of massive pyramids and the development of centralized bureaucratic government which the pharaohs ruled from their seat in the city of Memphis. The pharaohs were treated as gods (or at least partial gods) on earth, so they had great power. Dynasty III, beginning in 2686 B.C., lasted for the next five centuries years.

The Great Pyramid and its little brothers were built by Dynasty IV pharaohs as tombs for themselves and their high-ranking followers. The Egyptians of the Old Kingdom also built many other works: other pyramids, harbors, canals, temples, and monuments. Their prosperity encouraged trade, and the Old Kingdom Egyptians sent out many expeditions. Some were mining parties that looked for resources in the Sinai Peninsula, while others made the journey to the mysterious Kingdom of Punt. (To this day, the exact location of Punt remains an unsolved puzzle).

Khufu (Cheops) was a notable pharaoh of the Old Kingdom (c. 2589 - 2566 B.C.). We remember him for building the Great Pyramid of Giza, the largest pyramid in the Giza complex.

In terms of the development of civilizations, specialization occurs when there is enough food, housing, and safety for most people within the culture to comfortably survive. When such a stable state is reached, it becomes possible for some to specialize on just farming and others on just arts, or architecture, or mining. Each of the specialists can exchange his produce for what he needs from other specialists. Thus a civilization can collectively move beyond mere subsistence living and accomplish great things.

The Old Kingdom reached this level of prosperity, and, with specialization, it made advances in architecture, engineering, and science. They knew, for example, based on the flood level of the Nile in a given year, approximately how much grain they could expect to grow as a result. By storing the leftovers, they had reserves against famine or a surplus to trade for goods and services that they needed.

Technologically, the Old Kingdom was part of the Copper Age. The ancient Egyptians knew how to make and use copper tools. However, copper isn't a particularly strong metal (it bends or dulls easily) so making large weapons like swords is impractical. Large copper weapons and tools must be thick, which makes them heavy, so tools and weapons made on a smaller scale were generally more effective. Copper swords



were basically long, heavy knives. Copper armor was impractical, it didn't offer enough protection for the weight to justify it. Nevertheless, copper tools such as knives, hooks, mirrors, needles, and pots were crafted by artisans. Stone tools would have remained in common use throughout this time, since copper was a resource obtained with difficulty and expense.

Limestone is soft enough to be worked by copper tools if they are constantly resharpened or even reforged. Despite this limitation, the Old Kingdom Egyptians were able to cut, shape, transport, and position the millions of stone blocks needed to build the dozens of pyramids found throughout Egypt. Thousands of additional workers were needed to support those located at the building sites. Quarriers produced stone blocks and monuments like the obelisks, miners dug for copper and gold and other minerals, sailors transported supplies and materials up and down the Nile, and farmers grew the food to feed them all.

The Egyptians of the Old Kingdom also began to develop a unique system of picture-writing writing called hieroglyphics. They used this system to cover the insides of tombs and pyramids with symbols and to write hundreds of spells that were supposed to help the deceased to access a blessed afterlife.

The invention of papyrus (a kind of paper made from the pulp of a river plant *also* called papyrus) and hieroglyphics allowed the Old Kingdom bureaucracy to function. Scribes kept careful track of land ownership, farm production, crops, the level of the annual flood, and a host of other details. The importance of scribes was such that pharaohs consistently gave them estates for their support. Any food or wealth generated by these estates belonged to the scribe it was given to. In the long run, every time the pharaoh gave away a portion of the land like this, it made him poorer.

Building and maintaining immense pyramids progressively drained the pharaohs' treasuries. Towards the end of the centuries that Dynasties III-VI ruled, the burden of supporting the administrative bureaucracy—the officials, priests, and scribes—also became overwhelming. At the same time, fewer and fewer taxes were actually being collected for those treasuries because upper class people found loopholes in the tax system that allowed them to avoid paying! Finally, the prosperity of the kingdom meant that it grew numerically. Ruling over a large and widespread population, pharaohs had to depend more and more on bureaucrats. The pharaohs allowed the nomarchs—the governors of the administrative regions called nomes—to gain significant power and independence. Once they had power, the bureaucrats were often more interested in using it to benefit themselves than the state.

Eventually, the pharaohs' authority weakened during Dynasties V and VI. Positions in the government began to pass from father to son, rather than by the pharaoh's appointment, and, therefore, men in power grew less dependent on pharaohs. Instead, government officials grew jealous of their positions and independence, and arrogant towards their pharaohs, which undermined pharaoh's power.

Towards the very end of the Old Kingdom, natural disaster in repeated famines gave rise to questioning by even common people of why they should follow a pharaoh who was not doing his job—safeguarding the general prosperity by pleasing the gods! After several years of inadequate Nile flooding, food became more scarce, the centralized government could not hold and things fell apart. The nomarchs seized the opportunity for independence or were forced to do so when the pharaoh was unable to provide protection or assistance. The Old Kingdom had fallen.

### **First Intermediate Period (2181 B.C. - c. 1550 B.C.)**

The short-lived Dynasties VII and VIII initially attempted to rule from Memphis, as the previous dynas-



ties had done before them. But rival centers of power in the outlying nomes, particularly in Heracleopolis, undercut their efforts. They were overrun and displaced by Dynasty IX, which gave way in turn to Dynasty X, both of whom ruled most of Lower Egypt from the city of Heracleopolis.

The city—and nome—of Thebes was a powerful political entity throughout ancient Egyptian history. Prior to the unification of Egypt under Menes of Dynasty I, it had been the capital of the Kingdom of Upper Egypt. Whenever disaster and division struck Egypt, it routinely rose once more to prominence. During the First Intermediary Period, Dynasty XI rose up from among the rulers of Thebes. They fought with the Dynasties IX and X for control, slowly marching down the Nile River valley towards Memphis. Their struggle was resolved when Dynasty XI overthrew Dynasty X, conquering the remainder of Lower Egypt relatively quickly, thereby reuniting both kingdoms under a single pharaoh once more. All told, it required five dynasties and approximately 130 years to restore order and unity to ancient Egypt.

### **The Middle Kingdom (c. 2055 - 1650 B.C.)**

#### *The Short Version*

During the Middle Kingdom, Egypt experienced a revival. In 1991 B.C., a new Pharaoh named Amenemhet seized the throne. His successors restored Egypt's wealth and power. Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom were seen as shepherd kings, responsible for the well-being of even the common people. This era saw the expansion of trade with Canaan and Syria to the northeast, successful military campaigns of conquest in Nubia to the south, and the construction of public projects at home.

The Middle Kingdom was a rich and prosperous period. The middle classes, which included artisans, merchants (tradesmen), and scribes, helped Egyptian culture to thrive. The luxury they enjoyed was equal to the luxury of the Old Kingdom pharaohs! During this kingdom, the Egyptians controlled gold from Nubia, which they had conquered, and their produce was so abundant that they sought and traded with foreign peoples. To ensure stability, the Egyptians drained and cultivated the Faiyum (10,000 acres of former marshland south of Memphis), and stored its produce.

This Middle Kingdom ran out of steam in 1786 B.C., and weak rulers led Egypt for the next 120 years. Around 1670 B.C., Egypt was overrun by immigrants—the Hyksos—who had bronze technology. Bronze is made by melting copper and tin together, and it is much harder and more durable than copper. Because they had bronze, the Hyksos developed powerful new war technology in the shape of two-man chariots drawn by swift horses. They also had better bows than the native Egyptians. These two technologies, together with another set of famine years and aggression from the Nubians in Upper Egypt, made it easy for the Hyksos to sweep down upon Lower Egypt and end the Middle Kingdom.

#### *The Longer Version*

The Middle Kingdom begins during the fourteenth year of the reign of Mentuhotep II when he led Dynasty XI forces to victory, finally conquering Heracleopolis. This campaign ended Dynasty X, but it took Mentuhotep II another twenty-five years to fully bring all Egypt under his rule. Even though he was once more master throughout the land, the power and influence of the nomarchs continued. Needing their support, Dynasty XI largely left them alone and they remained more or less independent within their own territory. It was sufficient that they acknowledged the overall authority of the pharaoh once more, thus unifying the nation.





Although the evidence is circumstantial, Egyptologists suspect that Dynasty XII began with the assassination of Mentuhotep's grandson, Mentuhotep IV, by the royal vizier. Clear efforts were made to erase all mention of Mentuhotep IV from all public monuments or records. A few fragments survived the purge, which is why we know for certain that he existed. Furthermore, the historical tradition attributes seven kingless years to this period.

Whatever the means by which they rose to power, Dynasty XII pharaohs continued to promote prosperity and major building projects throughout the land, and Egypt experienced a revival. In 1991 B.C., a new XII Dynasty Pharaoh named Amenemhet seized the throne. His successors restored Egypt's wealth and power. Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom were seen as shepherd kings, responsible for the well-being of even the common people. This era saw the expansion of trade with Canaan and Syria to the northeast, successful military campaigns of conquest in Nubia to the south, and the construction of public projects at home.

Most notably, they undertook to improve the Faiyum marsh by digging canals. These efforts helped create a lake for holding over a portion of the Nile floodwaters, thereby turning the underused marshy area into a vast swath of new farmland. An estimated 10,000 acres were reclaimed from marshlands by these works, and the surplus grain grown there was sold, traded, or stored as needed.

Extra grain enabled further growth of middle-class, specialized occupations such as artisans, scribes, and merchants. Their prosperity enabled a greater proportion of the population to enjoy luxuries that only the nobility and pharaohs had access to during the Old Kingdom. Beginning during the Middle Kingdom, archeologists have found writings that were for personal enjoyment rather than strictly practical or religious purposes. A larger educated class with plenty of food provided the demand for authors to write and scribes to copy 'non-essential' literature. Stories, satire, and philosophy are genres that survive from this period.

Grain was in constant demand throughout the Mediterranean region, so far-flung trading centers and routes were developed. Mining expeditions to the Sinai region were resumed, some of them semi-permanently, as the demand for resources increased. In order to provide the boats to move trade and mineral cargos, shipbuilding also increased.

Dynasty XI pharaohs fought to consolidate their control over Egypt, while Dynasty XII pharaohs fought to expand those borders. Warlike pharaohs reconquered Nubia to the south, built walls for defense along the eastern border of the Nile Delta, and expanded their influence into Sinai. In this period the ancient Egyptians began to maintain a standing army, well trained and equipped. It was not particularly large, but the professional soldiers were reliable troops to which could be added peasant conscripts as needed. Nubians from the south—especially famous as archers—were included as part of the army.

In Nubia, Dynasty XII pharaohs built forts and established colonies of Egyptians in conquered territory. These helped establish strongly defended borders and protected trade routes. Luxury goods from Nubia, such as ivory, gold, and spices, were always in demand throughout Egypt's long history. Threats from Medjay tribesmen in the south were met by strong garrisons based in the forts along the Nile. They regularly patrolled and sent reports back to the pharaoh. The Egyptians recruited mercenaries from the Medjay tribesmen, using them as skirmishers to fight their nomadic kinsmen. These mercenaries later helped drive out the Hyksos invaders and eventually became the elite police and guard force for Dynasty XVIII. They guarded palaces, cities, and tombs—some of the most important sites in ancient Egypt.



Rather than instigate a direct confrontation with the still-powerful nomarchs, Dynasty XII rulers appear to have pursued a policy of co-opting them into the resurgent bureaucracy. They offered important positions in the priesthood to the nomarchs in exchange for dropping their hereditary political position. Marriage alliances may have also played a part in this strategy. By the end of their reign, the nomarchs were no longer a threat to Dynasty XII pharaohs' power. Cunning and diplomacy achieved what the force of arms in previous dynasties was unable to accomplish.

Dynasty XII also boasts the first female pharaoh, although her reign was not illustrious. Amenemhet III was her father, and one of the last pharaohs of Dynasty XII. He ruled for at least forty-five years and the Middle Kingdom reached the heights of its golden age during his rule. After his death, his son, Amememhet IV ruled for only nine years before being succeeded by Sobekneferu, the first female pharaoh. She ruled for four years and had no heir. With her died the last ruler of Dynasty XII and the Middle Kingdom. Egypt subsequently drifted into the Second Intermediate Period during the reign of Dynasty XIII.

### **Second Intermediate Period (1782 B.C. – 1570 B.C.)**

The early pharaohs from Dynasty XIII were not related to each other. Little is known about this oddball collection of rulers or their accomplishments. Neferhotep I was the strongest pharaoh from this dynasty, ruling from Nubia to the Nile Delta at least in name. However, rival dynasties rose up, breaking away and declaring their independence as time marched on. No major accomplishments are attributed to Dynasty XIII pharaohs except that they let Egypt slip from their grasp and into the clutches of foreigners.

In the Nile Delta, two rival dynasties (XIV and XV) rose up to challenge the power of Dynasty XIII pharaohs. Dynasty XIV was a minor power, centered on the ancient city of Xoïs. Most likely, they were swallowed up by the Hyksos of Dynasty XV that overran Egypt in 1670 B.C. Meanwhile, centered on the city of Avaris, in the Nile Delta region, the Hyksos (“foreigners”) who ruled Dynasty XV were regarded as hated alien invaders by later Egyptian dynasties.

We know that Hyksos names, some of their customs, and their dress were similar to those of Canaanite peoples. They did adopt many Egyptian customs during their time in Egypt, creating a blended society with influences from both cultures. At the height of their power, the Hyksos were dominant throughout Egypt, even where they didn't rule directly. Most of the artifacts and evidence we have for them were found in the Nile Delta region—consequently, we believe that that is where the bulk of their population lived.

How much actual animosity there was between native Egyptians and the foreign Hyksos when they first arrived—or how brutal their rise to dominion actually was—remains a mystery. Many Egyptologists believe that—initially—the Hyksos peacefully immigrated to the Nile Delta from Canaan over the course of decades. They only rose to power after the collapse of Dynasty XII left a power vacuum. The ancient Egyptian version of events, on the other hand, is that they came burning and pillaging, slaying the men and carrying off the women and children as slaves.

The Hyksos were certainly able to conquer Egypt because they possessed the secret of bronze technology. Bronze is an alloy (blending) of roughly 88% copper combined with 12% tin. Weapons and tools made from bronze were harder, stronger, more durable, and lighter than copper, which meant they could be larger. A copper sword blade needed to be thick to keep it from bending, but a bronze sword blade of the same weight was stronger so it could be made thinner and longer. Bronze armor was practical in that it offered sufficient protection to justify the weight, unlike copper.



Prior to this point in their history, ancient Egyptians had been limited to copper tools and weapons. Therefore, until they learned the secrets of making bronze from the Hyksos, the Egyptians were easily defeated. Because they had bronze, the Hyksos developed powerful new war technology in the shape of two-man chariots drawn by swift horses. They also had better bows than the native Egyptians. These two technologies, together with another set of famine years and aggression from the Nubians in Upper Egypt, made it easy for the Hyksos to sweep down upon Lower Egypt and end the Middle Kingdom.

Horses were either unknown or uncommon in Egypt prior to the arrival of the Hyksos. War chariots—constructed from bronze and drawn by horses—were a weapon that inspired terror in ancient times. In addition to a driver, one or two archers or spearmen typically rode in a chariot. On flat land—such as the desert sands of the Red Land of Egypt or the plains of Canaan—chariots were very effective fighting platforms. Thundering towards untrained peasant soldiers with trained archers aboard, they inflicted death and caused panic. When ancient writers described an army from this era, the number of chariots was often included as an indicator of its strength (such as the account of Siserá's army and chariots in the Bible).

The chariots of Egypt became a famous part of their military power and might. Prior to fighting with the Hyksos, however, chariots were not a part of the Egyptian army. Remember that the Egyptians only had copper prior to their struggle with the Hyksos. Copper wasn't strong enough, as a metal, to permit them to build working chariots. Bronze was light and strong enough. Eventually, even better chariots were built from iron once ancient civilizations learned how to work that metal.

In response to foreign rulers, a native Egyptian family from the rulers of Thebes claimed royal status, forming Dynasty XVI. Once again, this Upper Egyptian city was the seat of royal power. Dynasty XVI fought a series of wars with the Hyksos who were pushing south along the Nile River valley. Unsurprisingly, the better equipped Hyksos armies routinely defeated Egyptian soldiers loyal to Dynasty XVI. Eventually, they were able to conquer Thebes itself.

The Hyksos did not occupy or even exercise particularly tight control over Thebes and Upper Egypt. Consequently, Dynasty XVII rose up to oppose them soon after. Dynasty XVII, like Dynasty XVI before it, was a native Egyptian dynasty that ruled from Thebes as the center of its territory. Initially, there appears to have been peace between the native Egyptians of Dynasty XVII and the foreign Hyksos of Dynasty XV. Trade seems to have occurred fairly regularly. Dynasty XVII was likely a tributary—meaning that they gave tribute, i.e., gold, goods, and loyalty—of the Hyksos during the early portion of their reign.

Further south, the Nubians had seized the opportunity to regain their independence and had formed the Kingdom of Kush. They took advantage of the weaknesses of the Dynasty XVI and XVII to reclaim their territory. Once that was secure, they advanced north towards Thebes, never truly threatening the city itself, but contending for territory along the Nile River valley. We're not sure if there was a formal alliance between Hyksos and Kush, but it is clear that having enemies to the north and south put Dynasty XVII in a tricky strategic situation.

War between Dynasty XVII and the Hyksos and Kushites did eventually break out. The last two pharaohs of Dynasty XVII—Seqenenre Tao and Khamose—were particularly successful in their efforts to fend off Nubian forces and drive out the Hyksos. They steadily advanced, winning battles and territory in the north, but ultimately at the cost of their own lives. Seqenenre Tao's mummy was found by archeologists, and his head shows evidence of axe and knife wounds. Some think that he died valiantly in battle, while others believe that he was executed for rebellion by vengeful Hyksos warriors. His older son, Khamose, also won important victories – he is credited with using the first Egyptian chariots in battle against the



Hyksos – but died after only three years as pharaoh, before he could bring the war to completion. It would fall to Ahmose I, Seqenenre Tao's younger son to finally exile the hated Hyksos.

All told, at least five dynasties ruled for approximately 175 years during the second period of division in ancient Egypt. Small, independent regions also rose and fell during this period. A minor 'dynasty' ruled the city of Abydos, for example, for roughly fifty years.

Did Joseph come to Egypt during the Hyksos period? Was the New Kingdom the “new Pharaoh that knew not Joseph” that we read about in Exodus 1 and Acts 7? We don't know! Old Testament scholars and archaeologists have spent generations trying to nail down the details. What we do know is that these ancient kings connect to things we read about in our daily devotions.

### New Kingdom (c. 1550 - 1070 B.C.)

#### *The Short Version*

Hyksos kings ruled Egypt for almost a century, but they were displaced when the New Kingdom began. The New Kingdom marked a five-century period of Egyptian history known for its military conquests, wealth, and grandeur—a time when Egypt was perhaps the strongest power in the world.

The Hyksos had taught Egyptians bronze technologies, new weaponry, and chariot making and driving. Egypt also developed a permanent army with horse-drawn chariots that conquered territory as far north as modern Iraq and as far south as Ethiopia. Pharaohs of this period tended to be military leaders who wanted to build an empire, and successful pharaohs commanded tributes from conquered nearby cultures. Depending on the ruling pharaoh, the kingdom expanded or lost control of new territories. For example, Thutmose III and Ramses II, expanded Egypt's territory through military campaigns and established a vast empire during this era.

With returned prosperity, the middle and upper classes enjoyed a highly elevated lifestyle for ancient times. The New Kingdom is famous for its art, including elaborate tombs, temples, and monuments. The capital city shifted to Thebes, and powerful queens, such as Hatshepsut, left their mark on history.

However, Egypt's power began to wane about the time Israel appeared on the map. The authority of the pharaohs waned again as they weakened, sustaining military defeats and invasions from the outside, encroaching priests from the inside, and poor leadership from their own royal ranks. Military generals became more powerful than that pharaohs, and the New Kingdom crumbled.

#### *The Longer Version*

Dynasty XVIII marks the displacement of the Hyksos rulers and the beginning of the New Kingdom period. Egypt's power was at its greatest and its influence reached furthest during this era. Many of the most famous pharaohs ruled during the New Kingdom, and the fortunes of the nation rose and fell according to the character of the ruling pharaoh.

Under strong, warlike pharaohs ancient Egyptian power expanded. They pushed their borders north of the Promised Land into what is now modern Syria and south into Nubia (modern Sudan). Conquering



pharaohs brought home the spoils of foreign lands and required annual tribute from the peoples they had defeated. This wealth increased the prosperity of all Egypt and allowed trade to flourish. At home, the will of the pharaohs ruled supreme and their building programs gave work for many artisans. Generally pious, they also enriched the temples and priestly class with lavish gifts.

However, when weak pharaohs ruled during the New Kingdom, the enemies of Egypt took advantage of the opportunity to seize territories along the border. Some vassal states rebelled when their Egyptian overlords no longer kept a sharp eye and a strong show of force ready. The Hittite Empire, in particular, worked to expand their influence southwards from their home territory in modern day Turkey. East of them, the Assyrians and Babylonians also worked to extend their power and influence the Canaanite kingdoms to abandon Egypt. At home, infighting among political factions occasionally led to outright civil war. Twice, at the end of Dynasty XVIII and again at the end of Dynasty XIX, Egypt was rescued from descending into another intermediate period of chaos by the rise of strong new leaders who formed their own dynasties.

Ancient Egyptians largely prospered during the New Kingdom. Many of the pharaohs commissioned ambitious building projects such as temples, monuments, and statues. These enriched the cultural heritage of Egypt and remain as witnesses to its wealth and power during this period. The middle classes also continued to enjoy the benefits of a strong and stable society with leisure activities: literature, arts, and entertainment. Festivals and parties with dancers and music were something that ancient Egyptians enjoyed. Even workmen who were responsible for building the tombs of the pharaohs were able to afford their own tombs, which they carved out or built on their own time.

After his brother's death, Ahmose I, a younger son of Seqenenre Tao, took the throne. He was still a young boy when his father and brother died, so his mother acted as his regent while he grew up. She was beloved by the people and may have even rallied soldiers of Dynasty XVII to defend Thebes from an attack. Once Ahmose I reached manhood, he launched the final campaign to drive out the Hyksos. They were victorious, and by some ancient accounts a large number of Hyksos citizens were exiled from Egypt. Other archeological evidence shows that at least some Hyksos descendants remained in Egypt even after their defeat. Ahmose I's victory marks the beginning of Dynasty XVIII—not because he was of a different ruling family but because of the major shift in power and dominion throughout Egypt.

This demonstrates an important point to remember about Egyptian dynasties. Unlike dynasties in other cultures that are predominately recorded on the basis of family ties, the Egyptian dynasties are predominantly reckoned on the basis of power and the ruling city (capital). This can easily lead to confusion, so be mindful.

The fortunes of Dynasty XVIII rose and fell over the course of the next two hundred and fifty years. This dynasty boasted several powerful warrior pharaohs, two female pharaohs, and the most famous pharaoh of modern times, King Tutankhamum. Like every dynasty before and after, however, it too came to an end. Following Tutankhamum's death, two of his officials—his vizier and general—became pharaohs after him since he had no living children to inherit the throne. They ruled for twenty or thirty years and managed to bring a measure of order and stability back to ancient Egypt.



The New Kingdom included quite a list of notable rulers!

- ❑ Hatshepsut reigned during the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1478 - 1458 B.C.). Ruling for approximately twenty years, Queen Hatshepsut of Dynasty XVIII was the longest reigning and most successful female pharaoh in Egyptian history. The daughter, wife, and stepmother of kings, she expanded Egypt's trade routes throughout the Mediterranean Sea and built many monuments at home. Egyptologists have different theories about her relationship with Thutmose III, her stepson and successor. Some believe that they were cooperative partners. There is other evidence—such as the fact that most of her cartouches on temples and monuments were defaced and removed during Thutmose III's reign—to suggest that they were at odds with each other.
- ❑ Thutmose III reigned during the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1479 - 1425 BCE). Often referred to as the “Napoleon of Egypt” due to his military conquests, he expanded Egypt's territory through campaigns in Syria, Nubia, and the Levant, making Egypt a dominant regional power.
- ❑ Akhenaten reigned during the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1353 - 1336 BCE). He introduced the religious revolution of Atenism, claiming the sun god Aten as the one true god of the Egyptians, and trying to make his people monotheists (worshippers of one god) instead of polytheists (worshippers of many gods). Akhenaten also shifted the capital to the city of Akhetaten and supported a new art style characterized by elongated features.
- ❑ Tutankhamun reigned during the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1332 - 1323 BCE). He ascended the throne at a young age and is perhaps best known for his intact tomb discovered in the Valley of the Kings. His tomb provided a wealth of information about royal burials and ancient Egyptian material culture.
- ❑ Ramses II reigned during the 19th Dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1279 - 1213 BCE). Known as Ramses the Great, he was one of the most powerful and prolific pharaohs. He constructed grand monuments, including the temples of Abu Simbel, the Ramesseum, and numerous statues. He also fought the famous Battle of Kadesh against the Hittites and signed a peace treaty with them.
- ❑ Ramses III reigned during the 20th Dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1186 - 1155 B.C.). He fought against the Sea Peoples, a group of invaders, in the Battle of the Delta. He is known for his temple construction, military achievements, and efforts to maintain stability and security in Egypt.

The last pharaoh of Dynasty XVIII, Horemheb, had no children to inherit the throne, so he appointed his vizier—a man named Ramesses I—to rule Egypt after him. This proved to be a wise choice, for although Ramesses I only ruled for a year or two, his son, Seti I, and grandson, Ramesses II, led Dynasty XIX and Egypt to the greatest heights of national power and prestige in the ancient world. At home, they built monuments and temples to ensure that generations to come would remember them. Between them, these two pharaohs ruled Egypt for seventy-five prosperous years.





Dynasty XX rose up from the ashes of Dynasty XIX as the children and descendants of Ramesses II squabbled for twenty-five years over the throne of Egypt, eventually plunging the land into civil war. Setnakhte was the first pharaoh of Dynasty XX. He restored order by crushing and defeating the various factions fighting in the civil war. Although it is not certain whether Setnakhte was descended from Ramesses II, the remaining rulers of Dynasty XX were named Ramesses—Ramesses III through Ramesses XI. Only Ramesses III proved to be a valiant warrior and capable pharaoh, like his father and his namesake. Overall, Egypt slowly declined during the course of Dynasty XX's reign, steadily losing power and territory.

It should be noted, however, that Egypt was not alone in its decline. As the Bronze Age came to an end, there was a mighty upheaval throughout the ancient Near East. A strong and mysterious race, known as the Sea People, began to raid and burn cities all along the Mediterranean coastlines. There also seems to have been widespread weather events that brought about droughts and famines during this period. New iron weapons were being invented—stronger and lighter by far than bronze—which shifted the balance of military power. By the time that the region had fully transitioned to the Iron Age, many cities were destroyed and abandoned, and once powerful nations had been overthrown.

Ramesses III, second pharaoh of Dynasty XX, deserves full credit for saving his people and Egypt from the ravages of the Sea People. Unlike many other nations, who fell before their attacks, the Egyptians managed to decisively defeat them in two major battles. Although the Egyptians never developed a strong tradition as sailors, Ramesses III came up with a plan that took advantage of the strengths of his army. When the Sea People ships sailed up the Nile, he had archers lined along the banks. His soldiers used grappling hooks to stop the ships and haul them to the riverbanks, where archers relentlessly fired arrows into the warriors of the Sea People until they were slain. The captured remnants of the Sea People were likely settled in Canaan by Ramesses III and are believed by many to be the ancestors of the Philistines.

By winning wars against Libya, the Sea Peoples, Nubians, and Canaanite rebels, Ramesses III preserved Egypt from the fate of so many other nations. Egypt survived; but her economy was wrecked by the cost of warfare. Ramesses III's battles protected Egypt, but they did not bring home the wealth and plunder of conquered nations as under previous warrior pharaohs. His successors were unable to revive Egyptian power or prestige – as with the descendants of Ramesses II – his sons wasted their strength squabbling with each other for the throne. The power of the priesthood grew during this period, until by the reign of the last Dynasty XX pharaoh, Ramesses XI, they were openly ruling all of Upper Egypt from their capital in Thebes. The unity, power, and prestige of the New Kingdom ended with Ramesses XI.

In retrospect, the authority of the New Kingdom pharaohs seems to have been overthrown by a combination of factors: an increasingly powerful priesthood, inept leadership, military defeats in Levant campaigns (especially against the Hittites), and also a sustained barrage of attacks by Sea Peoples. A power vacuum formed, and army generals stepped in, putting the military in a position of great power. Egypt then had a succession of weak pharaohs, which did not help Egypt since it had depended on the personal skills of pharaohs who led the army in battle during this period. After 1070 B.C., Egypt was a “broken reed, which will pierce the hand of any man that leans on it.” That’s what the Assyrians said, in II Kings 18—shortly before they conquered Egypt.



## The Late Period

After the intermediate period that followed the New Kingdom, Egypt went through what is called its “Late Period.” During this time, Egypt was conquered or ruled in turn by the Nubians, Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans:

- ❑ Nubian or Kushite Dynasty (747 B.C. to 656 B.C.): The Nubians conquered Egypt during the 25th Dynasty, which is often referred to as the “Ethiopian Dynasty” in ancient sources. The Nubian kings of this dynasty originated from the Kingdom of Kush, located in what is now modern-day Sudan. The dynasty’s most prominent rulers were based in the city of Napata and later at Meroe. Nubian rulers of the 25th Dynasty managed to reunify Egypt and establish their authority, effectively becoming pharaohs. They ruled from their Nubian heartland while adopting Egyptian cultural and religious practices. The 25th Dynasty came to an end around 656 BCE when the Assyrians, led by King Ashurbanipal, conquered Egypt.
- ❑ Assyrian and Persian Dominance (664 - 525 B.C.): The Late Period began with Egypt falling under the control of the Assyrian Empire, starting with the conquest of Ashurbanipal in 664 B.C. Assyrian influence waned, and Egypt regained independence briefly, only to be conquered by the Persian Empire under Cambyses II around 525 B.C. The Persians ruled Egypt for much of the Late Period, with a few unsuccessful revolts and periods of Egyptian autonomy.
- ❑ Alexander the Great’s Conquest (332 B.C.): In 332 B.C., Alexander the Great invaded Egypt and was welcomed as a liberator from Persian rule. The city of Alexandria was founded by Alexander, becoming a center of culture, trade, and learning.
- ❑ Ptolemaic Dynasty (305 - 30 BCE): Following Alexander’s death, his general Ptolemy established the Ptolemaic dynasty, which ruled Egypt for nearly three centuries. The Ptolemies maintained Greek traditions while adopting Egyptian customs, leading to a blend of cultures known as Hellenistic Egypt.

Cleopatra VII reigned during the Ptolemaic (or Late) period (c. 51 - 30 B.C.). She was the last ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty and the last pharaoh of Egypt. We remember her mostly for that, and for the fact that she had relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, which influenced Roman-Egyptian relations.

- ❑ Roman Annexation (30 B.C.): Cleopatra VII’s alliance with Mark Antony led to defeat by Octavian (Augustus) in 31 B.C. Egypt became a Roman province in 30 B.C. after the suicides of Cleopatra and Antony, officially marking the end of the independent Egyptian state. Despite this Roman annexation, Egyptian culture, religion, and architecture continued to influence the wider Roman world.

Temples and monuments were built during the Late Period, reflecting both traditional Egyptian styles and Greco-Roman architectural elements. Hieroglyphic writing persisted, particularly in religious contexts, and the last known hieroglyphic inscription dates to the 4th century A.D.

Thus, although there were changes of dynasty and periods of disorder, Egypt’s civilization remained remarkably stable and unchanged right up until the time of Christ—a period of approximately three thousand of years. It is, of course, fascinating to speculate about why this was the case. For example, Author Suzanne Art theorizes that the Egyptians’ general, daily, and yearly experiences of the blessings and prosperity that arose from the regularity of their climate and seasons (especially the predictable yearly inundation of the Nile) led them to feel that traditional ways were best. She thinks they were uninterested in new



innovations or departures from established traditions, methods, and ideas. Rather, she says, “Following tradition, which meant doing everything the way it had always been done, was of critical importance. This Egyptian penchant [preference] for routine and the familiar helps to explain why the civilization changed so little over a period of nearly three thousand years.”<sup>1</sup>

Was Strauss right, or was the secret of Egypt’s relative stability to be found in some other factor or combination of factors? Was Egypt traditional because their natural barriers kept them relatively isolated in their early history? Were they stable because they believed it would be eternal damnation to oppose the will of their god-king’s wisdom? Was it something else entirely? Could we even call them “opposed to innovation” when we consider their advances in art, science, mathematics, technology, and of course the incredible feat of the pyramids? Only God knows for certain, but historians (and students of history) have endless fun speculating about these points!

## PYRAMIDS AND THE AFTERLIFE

Perhaps you have been wondering whether I would ever get around to more than a cursory mention of the pyramids and mummies of Egypt? Do not despair. We will now discuss these things, beginning from the outside (the construction of the pyramids) and working inward to the sarcophaguses (coffins), mummified bodies, and even the innermost chamber of mystery: the Egyptians’ beliefs about the afterlife.

### Pyramids From the Outside

In the Early Period, before the Old Kingdom, ancient Egyptians buried their pharaohs in simple rectangular tombs build of mud bricks and called *mastabas*. As Egyptian culture grew more prosperous, prestigious pharaohs and noblemen were buried in more elaborate stone tombs that kept bodies above the desert sands.

Over time, these burial buildings evolved into step pyramids (think of a giant three-sided flight of stairs) and finally straight-sided pyramids. Egyptologists have suggested that pyramids were constructed in the form that they were to provide a staircase for the deceased pharaoh, now a full-fledged god, to mount to heaven and join the pantheon of Egyptian gods.

A straight-sided pyramid looks triangular, but it is built with a square foundation whose sides slope up to a single point. At any time, from the ground, you can only see two sides. This is true, even if you were to stand at the top of a tall mountain. Unless you were able to fly almost directly overhead, the angle of the sloping sides hides the rest of the pyramid from view. The straight-sided Great Pyramid of Giza, as you have already learned, was built during the reign of King Khufu, of Dynasty IV. Khufu’s grandson, Khafre, and great-grandson, Menkaure, also built smaller pyramids near the Great Pyramid on the Giza Plateau.

Some scholars speculate that pyramids were perhaps meant to help the dead pharaohs climb back up to the heavens to rejoin the gods. The richer or more important a person, the more supplies and comforts he took with him.

1. *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt* *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt, 4th ed.*, by Suzanne Strauss Art (Wayside Publishing, 2013), p. 21.



The Great Pyramid of Giza is the oldest, largest, and longest surviving Wonder (sights famous for their size, beauty, and uniqueness) of the ancient world. The remaining six Wonders were built between 600-280 BC, whereas the Great Pyramid was built 2,000 years earlier in 2584 BC.

Listed in order of construction, the Seven Wonders of the ancient world were: the pyramids of Giza (Egypt 2584 BC), the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (Iran c. 600 BC), the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (Turkey c. 550 BC), the statue of Zeus at Olympia (Greece 435 BC), the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus (Turkey 351 BC), the Colossus of Rhodes (island in the Aegean Sea 292 BC), the Lighthouse of Alexandria (Egypt 280 BC). Other sights were listed by the Greeks but through the centuries these seven have won out as the most famous works built by ancient civilizations.

Those magnificent tombs were engineering marvels. The Great Pyramid was originally 481 feet tall and its base was 756 feet wide on each side—the tallest man-made building in the world until the 1800's. It held that record for 43 centuries! To build it, the ancient Egyptians had to cut, transport, and position 2.3 million blocks of stone.

The engineering of pyramids is incredibly precise: each side is perfectly lined up with the compass: north, south, east, and west. The sides are almost exactly equal in length, with less than three inches difference. The pyramid was built with more than two million blocks of stone, each weighing more than two tons, by subjects paying their share of a labor tax to the pharaoh, rather than slaves as might be expected. They say there are enough blocks in the three pyramids at Giza to build a stone wall ten feet high and one foot thick all the way around France.



The methods that the ancient Egyptians used to build the pyramids are now a mystery. Scholars and engineers argue over different ways that they think would work but no one really knows anymore! We do know that they only had copper tools to work with. Copper is a metal, but it isn't very hard or strong. It can be used to cut softer stone—like limestone—but harder types of stone required different methods for cutting. They didn't have wheel technology until Dynasty V, so they couldn't build wagons or pulleys—and cranes need a pulley to work. Therefore, the Egyptians likely couldn't have used those to help them move or position the giant stones.

Most textbooks on Egypt will tell you that they must have built some sort of ramp system, which would have been used to drag the stones on big wooden sleds up the side of the pyramid. It is also possible that they used levers to lift the blocks of stone into their final position. The Greek historian, Herodotus, records that the Egyptians he asked claimed that levers were used as part of their method. Most likely, they would lift one side by levers and put a log or block under it to hold it up. Then they would lift the other side and put a block there. Repeating the process would lift the stone bit by bit until it could be safely dragged or pushed into place on the next level up. Another method that has been demonstrated to work involved levering the whole block in a single motion, effectively rotating it up to the next level on its edge like a box being rolled up a set of stairs.

New theories arise, however, even in the last few years, and old conspiracies always remain popular. For example, In 2001, researchers from Caltech successfully performed an experiment that validated parts of a new theory proposed by a businesswoman named Maureen Clemmons in 1999. She wondered whether a system of kites and pulleys could have been used to raise obelisks or even the stone blocks that built the pyramids. The scientists from Caltech were able to hoist a 6,900 pound, 15-foot obelisk into a vertical position in only 25 seconds using the kite method. They actually generated enough lift from their kite that the whole obelisk was suspended in mid-air for a moment. Admittedly, there is virtually no evidence for her theory in the archeological record, apart from a few cryptic hieroglyphs that could maybe be interpreted as depicting kites and ropes. But her idea did work! Certainly, enough to make it a possibility however strange.

Another new theory comes from a British builder, Chris Massey, which he developed after a trip to Egypt. In 2012, he proposed that the ancient Egyptians used water shafts, locks, and floats to move the two million stone blocks to the correct position. He has also conducted experiments and built models that demonstrate how his theory could actually work. Many challenge the scalability of his theory, claiming that the water pressure would surpass the structural strength of the available materials. But we know that the ancient Egyptians weren't afraid of thinking big, and they were familiar with using water from the Nile to assist them in their work whenever practical. So, again, it's a possibility, and we don't have a conclusive answer one way or another.

Even if these theories are wrong, the methods themselves work and rely on technology and materials that were available to the ancient Egyptians, and so historians enjoy trying each theory on for size. History is humbling in this way, and that's a good thing! When humans realize that they don't and can't know everything, that can drive them to seek God, who can and does. "How did the Egyptians build the pyramids?" would be a great question to ask Him in Heaven!



Modern folk still can't figure out how exactly the pyramids were built, but any option would require, at the least, tens of thousands of workers. In 450 BC, when the ancient Greek historian Herodotus asked the Egyptians how they built the pyramids, he was told that: "the Great Pyramid had taken 400,000 men 20 years to build, working in three-month shifts 100,000 men at a time."

Keep in mind that it had been 2,000 years since the pyramids were built. So, it is very possible that the answer given by the Egyptians was exaggerated. Over time, the stories telling how many men worked and how long it took to build might have been 'improved'. Today, archeologists who have examined the evidence from the ruins of villages for the workers and other clues estimate that there were only about 10,000 men at the site at any one time. They probably worked three month shifts and it took them approximately 30 years to finish building the pyramid.

The Great Pyramid was initially encased in an outer layer of polished limestone, which brilliantly reflected the sun's light, causing the pyramid to glitter and shine like a pristine, sharp edged, blindingly white jewel the size of a mountain. Nearly 4,000 years passed until a major earthquake damaged the casing in 1303 AD. In the decades that followed, the Egyptians carried away most of the exterior stone for their own building projects. Now only a few blocks remain at the base. But those that do remain demonstrate the skill and precision of ancient Egyptian stonemasons. The spacing between stones – remember that these were cut using only basic (to modern folk) mathematics and copper-age tools—was only 0.5 mm (1/50th of an inch) wide. Look around your house to see if your parents have a 'fine point' pen. If it is 0.7mm or larger, then the tip of that pen wouldn't fit into the crack between the casing stones! You would need an extra fine point pen—0.5 mm—to be successful.

### The Purpose of Pyramids

Pyramids are the enormous tombs of kings. They were built first to provide for the pharaohs' safe journey to the afterlife *with* their earthly bodies and goods intact (about which more in a moment). To that end, they were not only stuffed with food and furniture and games and weapons and jewelry and treasure and mummified pets (don't worry—I'll come back to that), but *also* they were elaborately booby-trapped against thieves. None of that did any good in the end, of course, but the first few dozen (or hundred) thieves must have gotten nasty surprises.

Secondarily, the pyramids were to preserve the pharaohs' names for posterity. As great kings with the blood of the gods in them, Egyptians (especially perhaps of the Old Kingdom) believed that the pharaohs deserved to be remembered. Pyramids were designed to stand for millennia as enduring reminders of the great kings and Egypt's great civilization. To that end, they were decorated with lavish artistic depictions of the pharaohs' exploits and daily life. Obelisks and other stone monuments also proclaimed the great deeds of prominent pharaohs, but none more magnificently than the pyramids! Thus, the pyramid was a kind of glorified tomb-storage closet-shrine-vault, *and* a national monument to Egypt's greatness.

### Development of Embalming and Mummification

If you were to enter the Great Pyramid of Giza (which would today be a relatively easy and well-lighted experience), you would wind your way through various passages to the heart of the structure, and there you would find a large stone coffin that once contained the pharaoh's mummified remains. Well and Good. Have you ever wondered, however, why the Egyptians chose to disembowel their (most important) dead bodies, dry them out as if preserving meat for winter, then wrap them in strips of linen like a present? Where, you might wonder, did they ever get the notion to develop the processes of embalming (that's the disemboweling and drying out part) and mummification (that's the wrapping up like a present part)?





Historians think it came about in this way. The earliest dead Egyptians (and many later ones also) seem to have been buried in the plentiful and otherwise-useless desert sand. There, a lack of moisture combined with heat preserved bodies for a much longer period of time than burial in moist, cool ground would. When shifting winds or sands unearthed a corpse, living Egyptians would have observed the body still in a high state of preservation with skin and hair intact.

Historians such as Suzanne Strauss Art theorize that the Egyptians reasoned (or hoped) their way from the preserved bodies they found to an entire theology of an afterlife. She thinks that “The Egyptians came to believe that everyone had a *ba* (soul) and a *ka* (an invisible twin of himself). At the moment of death, the *ka* and the *ba* were released from a person’s body. The corpse had to be preserved so that after burial the *ka* could once again reside in it. Otherwise, there would be no chance for an Afterlife.”<sup>1</sup>

You may feel that it is a bit of a stretch to imagine that an Egyptian would find a well-preserved dead body and arrive at the conclusion that dead people could or would live on in that body, but remember that historians have a difficult job to do—explaining history and drawing useful lessons for our lives from the facts of the past—so it is only fair that they should have some fun now and then by speculating about how ancient peoples got to believe the things they did. If you wish to suppose a different reason for Egyptian theology of an afterlife, you are welcome to join them!

However, it happened, the Egyptians did believe in the *ba* and the *ka* and the necessity of preserving corpses. In fact, when Egyptians began to create fancier tombs for their rulers, they must have been horrified to discover that the bodies disintegrated in the cooler, damper stone tombs. Embalming and mummification were developed as a way to preserve the bodies for the afterlife and thus keep the spirit of the pharaoh alive forever (perhaps to arise and defend his nation in the future, as many another culture would believe after them—just think of the legends about King Arthur or Constantine XI, both of whose spirits were supposed to be preserved alive somewhere to help England and Byzantium in a future hour of need). This sort of physical preservation was also a good way to honor the pharaoh, even in death.

I will try to be brief in my description of embalming and mummification—after all, you can always look up the gory details elsewhere! The embalmers first took out squishy organs like the lungs, heart, brains, and stomach. They didn’t cut the body open any more than they had to because, remember, they believed it would be wanted by the dead person later, and large scars are inconvenient as well as unsightly. Therefore, they would hook the brains out through a small hole near the dead body’s nose cavity instead (trying very hard not to disfigure the face in the process), and they took out all the major organs (stomach, liver, intestines, etc.) through a small slit in the torso.

The organs they placed in special “canopic” jars with lids in the form of human and animal heads (it’s disappointing to relate this, but “canopic” has no special meaning—it was simply the name of the town where these funeral jars were manufactured, as if one were to say “Taiwanese toys”). They left the heart because they believed it was the seat of the dead person’s being, intelligence, and personality.

Then, the embalmers used a special kind of salt called “natron” to dry out the body. They would bury the body in natron as one buries a body in sand at the beach. When the body was dry (a process that took forty days and was accompanied by many rituals, prayers, spells, etc.), they would stuff sawdust back in where the organs had been so that the body was the right shape.

1. *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt* *Early Times: The Story of Ancient Egypt, 4th ed.*, by Suzanne Strauss Art (Wayside Publishing, 2013), p. 76.



The body was now ready for mummification (being made into a mummy). The word “mummy” comes from the Arabic *mumiyah* (“embalmed body”) and *that* comes from the Persian word *mum* (“wax”), which was in fact used to glue together the long strips of linen cloth in which the Egyptians wrapped the body. Again, you must imagine endless rituals and prayers as part of this process, as well as many spells being chanted or written and tucked in among the strips of linen. When everything was finished, the body was ready to be buried in a special painted and decorated coffin called a sarcophagus.

Incidentally, many mummified animals have also been found in Egypt, but relatively few are buried with their owners. Many are buried in places of ceremony or in pet cemeteries. That’s right—the Egyptians also invented pet cemeteries!

### **Tomb Goods**

In addition to their bodies, Egyptians also believed that a dead pharaoh would eventually be able to enjoy the things that were buried with him—but nothing else. Imagine packing up everything needed for an *eternal* afterlife! Thus, while pyramids were designed to house the pharaoh’s mummies safely, they also had to provide space (and, remember, defenses against thieves) for all the royal treasures of a ruler. A pharaoh needed a whole pyramid to supply himself for the next world as befitted his rank.

Unsurprisingly, the tomb of a dead pharaoh was an irresistible attraction to generation upon generation of thieves—and all the priests’ defensive skills didn’t do a bit of good against them. By the time of the New Kingdom, Egyptians were wise enough to hide their dead pharaohs’ tombs and treasures away in a distant valley, cut under cliff faces behind hidden underground entrances, instead of parading them in a structure that can be seen from space. (One worries about the fates of those who built these tombs—after all, even in Egyptian theology, dead men tell no tales.) Thus we have the Valley of Kings, and thus a few tombs survived unmolested to be discovered in modern times by archaeologists.

Therefore, when a British nobleman named Lord Canarvon found the unmolested New Kingdom tomb of a young pharaoh named Tutankhamen in 1922 A.D., he was able to catalogue the wealth of the pharaohs (and incidentally begin a revival of Egyptian-styled clothes, hair, cosmetics, jewelry, furniture, and decorations that reached all the way down to the American Flappers and influenced the Art Deco movement). They found clothes, food, furniture, games, model boats, jewelry, weapons, tools, musical instruments, cosmetics, charms, amulets, and shoes. They found little clay images of servants (who were, perhaps, supposed to come to life and serve the pharaoh).

### **What Happened After Burial**

Early on, it was believed that direct service to a pharaoh was essential if one was to have any chance at eternal life, since the divine pharaoh would need to be served after his death and would thus grant eternal life to the servants he valued. In Middle Kingdom times, this belief changed in the aftermath of the failure of pharaohs to ensure prosperity. Afterwards, it was believed more and more that anyone who properly worshipped Osiris (the god of the dead) could attain eternal life apart from serving the pharaoh well.

Whether a pharaoh or a humble workman, Egyptians came to expect a judgment in which their honesty, truthfulness, and good works were weighed on a scale against their bad works. They believed that Osiris had a judgment hall where each person’s heart was weighed against the Feather of Truth. The soul coming to be judged must plead innocent to forty-two mortal sins before Osiris, and then came the judgement. If the heart balanced reasonably well against the Feather of Truth—the person would be sent to the happy Kingdom of the West. If not, the person would be fed to a monster.



As I mentioned previously, Egyptians were buried not with Bibles but with copies of the *Book of Coming Forth by Day* (we who know that they never rose from their tombs now call it *The Book of the Dead*). This collection of prayers and spells and instructions was written on papyrus rolls and even painted on tomb walls as a kind of guide to navigating the complex journey through the afterlife, avoiding dangers, and ultimately achieving eternal life.

The soul's success in the afterlife depended on their knowledge of spells and their ability to recite them accurately. The book included spells and instructions for protection against hostile spirits and demons, and guidance through the trials of the underworld. As such, the text often emphasized the importance of aligning one's actions with the principles of Ma'at, the concept of balance, harmony, and truth. The deceased were often identified with Osiris, the god of the afterlife, in their journey toward resurrection.

The Book of the Dead was not a single standardized text; instead, it varied in content and arrangement depending on the individual's social status, beliefs, and personal preferences. Wealthier individuals could afford longer and more elaborate versions with additional spells and illustrations. Many versions of the Book of the Dead included detailed illustrations depicting scenes from the afterlife, such as the weighing of the heart against the feather of Ma'at.

How sad it is to think that all this care prepared not a single Egyptian soul to face death and find eternal life.

### Conclusion

The pyramids were wonders, sure enough—but in the end, they're still tombs. That tells us a great deal about the Egyptian view of life—and death.

Does that seem strange to you? Is our civilization really more advanced? In *Coming Home, Timeless Wisdom for Families*, Dr. James Dobson told a story about how he learned something important about life—and death. His teenaged daughter came home one day and said, “Hey, Dad! There's a great new game out. I think you'll like it. It's called Monopoly.” Dobson just smiled. Here's what he says:

We gathered the family together and set up the board. It didn't take the kids long to figure out that old Dad had played this game before. I soon owned all the best properties, including Boardwalk and Park Place. I evex. You leave this world just as naked as the day you came into it.

The Egyptians thought hard about that “box” we call death. They spent their whole lives thinking about how to beat it. In our culture, we spend a lifetime ignoring death—but it doesn't ignore us. Everything this world has to offer all goes back in the box one day. Maybe this can help you see life and death more clearly. Let's set our eyes on things above, in Heaven, not on this world's Monopoly money. Let's think outside the box!