

ANCIENT EGYPT

Geography

The key to the location and wealth of Ancient Egypt was a river – **the Nile**. It flows through Egypt from the Ethiopian mountains to the delta in the Mediterranean and brings life to the land.

The Nile **floods** regularly, thus creating a narrow stretch of very **fertile land** in the middle of **desert**. Without the Nile the Egyptian civilization would hardly have prospered or even existed. However, the Nile floods were sometimes so great they destroyed villages and so people had to cooperate to **control the floods by building canals and dams**. Moreover, the river became an artery of **transport** in Egypt.

Creation of the State

As the need to control the Nile forced the people in Egypt to cooperate and coordinate, they set up a state. It was ruled by the **pharaoh**, a single man who possessed **absolute power**.

At first, Egypt was divided into two separate kingdoms, **Upper Egypt** which was located along the upper (or southern) stretch of the river Nile and **Lower Egypt** which was situated mainly in the Nile Delta.

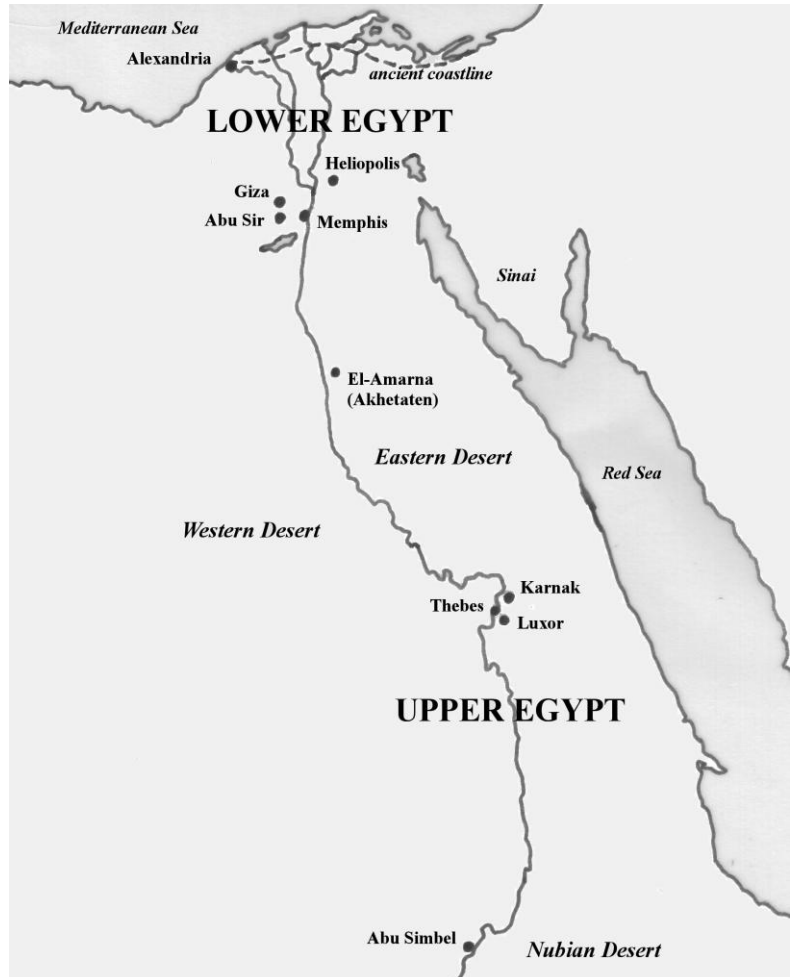
About **3100 BC** the pharaoh **Menes united Egypt** into one kingdom and so began the story of the most powerful state of its time.

Chronology and events

There are two basic methods of counting time in our studies of Ancient Egypt – the kingdoms (and intermediate periods between them) or the dynasties of pharaohs (because the use of years until the New Kingdom is very inaccurate and varies depending on the sources):

Old Kingdom: 3000 – 2160 BC 1st – 6th dynasty

- The centre of power is **Memphis**.
- **Pyramid building** - the **Step Pyramid of Djoser** was designed around 3000 BC by the architect Imhotep
- Then **classic pyramids** by pharaohs **Sneferu, Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure – in Giza**.

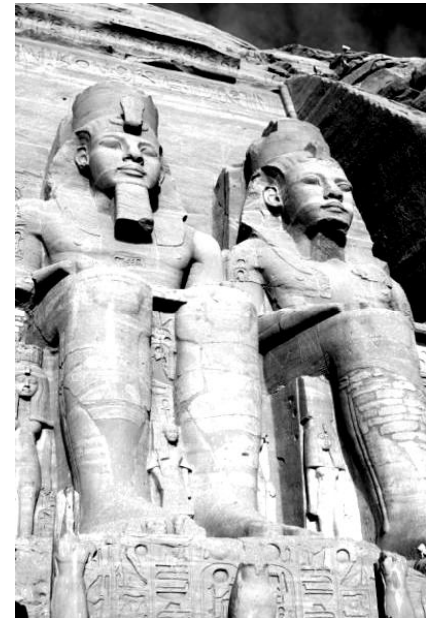


Middle Kingdom 2050 – 1780 BC 11th – 12th dynasty

- The centre of power is **Thebes**.
- Classical Egyptian period in culture and the arts.
- Then Egypt is taken over by the **Hyksos** (nomads from Asia)

New Kingdom 1550 – 1070 BC 18th – 20th dynasty

- Egypt becomes the most powerful state in the known world.
- Queen **Hatshepsut** rules like a man. **Thutmose III** is a great warrior and expands the Egyptian territory to its maximum.
- **Valley of the Kings** is founded to house the tombs of Egyptian kings.
- Temple complexes of **Luxor** and **Karnak** are built.
- **Amenhotep IV** (18th dynasty) undertakes a great **religious reform** – changing the Egyptian polytheistic faith to monotheism with the only god **Aten**. He also changes his name to **Akhnaten** and builds a new capital city **Akhetaten** (today's El Amarna). His wife is regarded the most beautiful woman of the time – **Nefertiti**.
- His successor **Tutankhamen** brings the old religion back and proclaims Akhnaten a heretic. He also moves the capital city back to Thebes.
- **Ramesses II** (19th dynasty) is a great warrior and **defeats the Hittites at Kadesh in 1285 BC**. He signs probably the first **peace treaty** in human history – **with the Hittite king Hattusili III in 1270 BC**. He also builds monumental temples and giant statues (Abu Simbel – see picture). Moreover, he might be the pharaoh referred to in the *Exodus* in the Bible.



Late Period 664 – 332 BC 26th – 31st dynasty

- In **525 BC the Persians** conquer Egypt and the country is influenced by Persian culture and religion.

Ptolemaic Period 323 – 30 BC

- In **332 BC Alexander the Great** conquers Egypt and founds **Alexandria** as the new capital city.
- After his death, his friend **Ptolemy** becomes the pharaoh and founds the Ptolemaic dynasty.
- **Cleopatra VII** has an affair with Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony, fights Roman armies and after she loses the battle of Actium, **Egypt becomes a Roman province in 30 BC**.

Government and society

The supreme ruler of Egypt was a **pharaoh** and all land belonged to him. He was assisted by a **vizier**. Until the end of the 20th dynasty it was an **autocracy**. Later the pharaohs were assisted in their rule by high priests so Egypt became a **theocracy**. The priests were the educated class so they had most of the political power.

Other respected classes were clerks and soldiers. The lowest social group were **slaves**, often prisoners of war.

Economy

The **annual floods** brought excellent **fertile soil**. To be able to predict the coming of the next flood, the Egyptians needed to create a 365-day **calendar**. And to use the flood to their best advantage they built **irrigation systems**. The Egyptians grew mainly wheat and they had to give about one fifth of their produce to the pharaoh. Locally, the economy was organized by temples.

The most important crafts in Egypt were **weaving**, making **papyrus** from reeds and ropes, **metal** work (copper, bronze), **glassblowing**, **engineering**, building from **stone**, **shipbuilding** (ships for the Nile and shallow waters).

Culture

The Egyptians wrote on **papyrus** or carved into **stone**. They used three main kinds of writing:

- The **hieroglyphs** were the oldest. These were pictures describing or symbolizing certain meanings, later clusters of consonants.
- **Hieratic writing** was younger and it was used mostly by priests in religious texts.
- Later, **demotic** (or popular) writing was the simplest and most widely spread. It was used for administration, tax records and everyday life.

Egyptian writing was deciphered by French archeologist **J. F. Champollion** in 1822. He used the **Rosetta Stone** found by Napoleonic soldiers in 1799. The stone contained a set of three identical texts in three languages – Greek, hieroglyphic and hieratic.

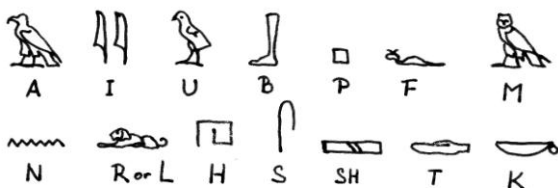
The most famous literary work was *the Hymn to the Sun* written by Akhnaten, an ode celebrating the sun as the life-giver.

The Egyptians were good **mathematicians** and used **advanced geometry**, especially in architecture. They also had detailed knowledge of **human anatomy** (because of mummification) and were advanced in **medicine**.

TASK 1: Write down your name in Egyptian hieroglyphics!

We can read the name of pharaohs from **cartouches** (a box enclosing writing) found on the walls in their tombs.

Study the Egyptian alphabet containing mostly consonant sounds. Then try to spell your name using these hieroglyphic symbols – your name will be in a cartouche!



Religion

Egyptian religion was **polytheistic** which means they believed in more than one god. The most powerful was **Ra, the sun god**. Other respected gods were, for example, **Osiris**, the Nile god, **Horus**, the sky god, **Anubis**, the god of the dead, or **Set**, the god of destruction. Local deities were also very common. Most Egyptian gods possessed some animal features in their appearance.

The only **monotheistic** period was during the reign of Akhnaten (Amenhotep IV), who promoted the sun god **Aten** and banned all other gods. After his death he was proclaimed a **heretic** and the situation returned to its previous state.

The **pharaoh** considered himself to be of **divine origin** and the people prayed to him.

The Egyptians were very religious people and from the cradle to the grave, rituals were an essential part of their lives. They were extremely conscious about their **afterlife**. The body had to be preserved – **mummified** – for the soul to survive and live forever. The mummy was then placed in a **sargophagus** in a **tomb** with objects of everyday life to keep the soul “comfortable.” The mummy was also provided with the **Book of the Dead**, which was a set of instructions for the afterlife and the judgment of the dead.

TASK 2: Mummification – *If the body is preserved, the soul will survive.*

For the soul to live eternally, the body needs to be preserved. Without it, the soul would wander the world helplessly for eternity.

Place these steps of the mummification process in the correct order – from the first to the last. Also, sometimes you are asked to choose the correct option. Remember, the process was very practical.

- a. The body is treated with oil and the preserved with pine resin.
- b. Remove the internal organs – *lungs, heart, stomach, liver, intestines*. However, one must stay in the body. Which one? Then place the other four organs into the canopic jars (to go with the body into the tomb).
- c. Stuff the body cavities with resin-soaked linen.
- d. Amulets are put between the linen wrappings and burial mask is put on the face.
- e. Wash the body in the waters of the Nile.
- f. The body is wrapped in linen.
- g. Put on make-up and a wig.
- h. Dry the body – How was this done? *In hot air / in the fire / cover the body in salt*.
- i. Remove the brain using a special *hook / acid / needle*.



Architecture

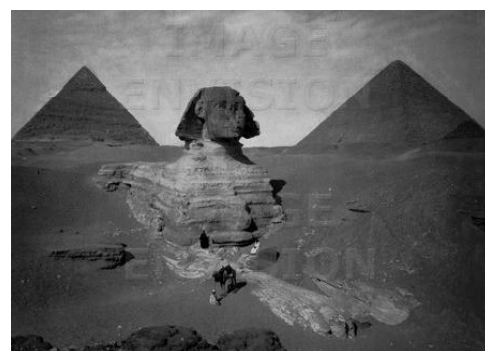
The most common buildings of Ancient Egypt were temples, tombs and pyramids.

The **temples** were dedicated to specific gods. They were often decorated by huge **statues** – **colossi**, for example by Ramesse II at Abu Simbel, and **obelisks**. The most famous temple complexes were in **Luxor and Karnak**.

The **pyramids** were not built during the whole Egyptian era. The first tombs were **mastabas**. These were later used to build step pyramids. The first – simply called the **Step Pyramid** - was built by king **Djoser** around 3000 BC. Another was built by **Snofru**.

The well-known classic pyramids of Egypt were built by the **pharaohs of the 4th dynasty**. Pyramids were constructed out of millions of stone blocks transported along the river Nile on ships and moved usually by slaves. The three big pyramids of **Giza** were built by:

- **Khufu** (or **Cheops**) the biggest pyramid in Giza, originally 146.6 m high
- **Khafra** - the pyramid is watched over by the **Sphinx** – see picture
- **Menkaura** (the smallest pyramid in Giza)



Later dynasties and wealthier people had themselves buried in **tombs** that were richly decorated, depending on the social position and wealth of the “resident.” Pharaohs and members of the royal family were usually buried in the **Valley of Kings** or the **Valley of Queens** near Thebes. Most of the tombs either have not been discovered yet or more usually, they have been robbed during the intervening millennia.

The most famous tomb is probably **the tomb of Tutankhamen**, the son of Akhnaten, which was uncovered by **Howard Carter** in 1922. As it was untouched, we can observe the richness and complexity of the artefacts in the tomb.

TASK 3: Building a pyramid

Read this account by Herodotus, describing the building of a pyramid:

Cheops came to the throne and plunged into all manner of wickedness. He closed the temples and forced the Egyptians to work in his service. Some were required to drag blocks of stone down to the Nile from quarries...others received the blocks after they were sent in boats across the river...It took 10 years to make the stone ramp for moving the stones. It is built of polished stone and is covered with carvings of animals...The pyramid itself was built in steps. They raised the remaining stones by means of machines formed of short wooden planks.

Imagine you are a pyramid builder. Write down five things or factors which you think have to be considered when building a pyramid.

REVISION TASKS

TASK 4:

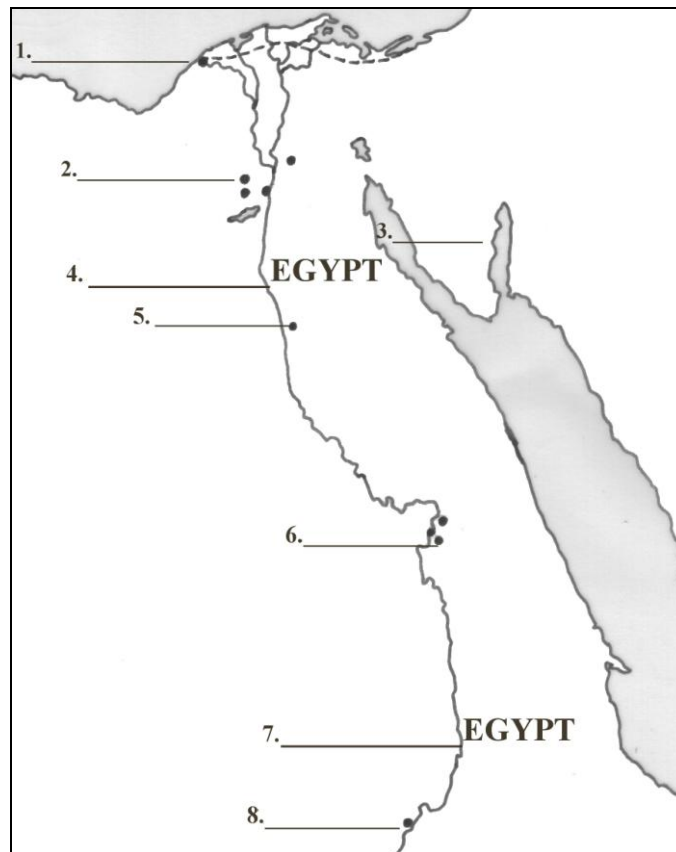
Revision - Order these events chronologically:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| a. peace treaty with the Hittites | f. Tutankhamen's burial |
| b. monotheistic reform | g. Champollion deciphering the hieroglyphics |
| c. the building of Khufu's pyramid | h. Howard Carter's excavations |
| d. unification of Egypt | i. Alexander the Great rules Egypt |
| e. death of queen Cleopatra VII | |

1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____ 4 ____ 5 ____ 6 ____ 7 ____ 8 ____ 9 ____

TASK 5:

Label the map:



TASK 6:

With a partner or in a group discuss why

- you are glad you do not live in Ancient Egypt.
- you would be happy to live in Ancient Egypt.