

# Egypt – An Ancient Civilisation

## *Thirty Centuries of History: from Menes to Cleopatra*

When people think of ancient Egypt, they think perhaps of pyramids or pharaohs, or of names like Nofretete\* or Tutankhamun\*, or most likely of the river Nile. Apart from the name Nile all other words and names refer to a period of time which began about 5000 years ago. The time of the history of the kings (pharaohs) in Egypt covers a period of about 3000 years, longer than any other civilisation in world history.

A huge number of man-made objects (such as tools, weapons, etc.), architecture (temples, tombs\*), texts and other material have been conserved due to the dry climate of Egypt. So we have a good knowledge of pharaonic Egypt.

The history of pharaonic Egypt is usually divided into three main epochs and some in-between periods with political unrest. In about 3100 BC a king called Menes from Upper Egypt conquered Lower Egypt (the Delta land) and ruled the lands as the first of the pharaohs. Memphis in the north and Thebes in the south became the most important centres. The first great period was that of the Old Kingdom (ca 2700 to 2200 BC). In that age the pharaohs built huge tombs for themselves, the pyramids. After a time of wars among rival kings a second great period followed, the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040 to 1630 BC). For two and half centuries there was peace and trade grew well. Egyptian ships sailed the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. But then foreigners – the Egyptians called them Hyksos – attacked Lower Egypt. They brought new weapons with them, including horse-drawn chariots\*. By 1550 BC the Egyptians managed to drive the Hyksos out of the country. A new age, the New Kingdom (ca. 1550 to 1180 BC), brought another long period of peace and unity. In that time, a well-known female pharaoh, Hatshepsut\*, ruled. Her stepson Thutmose III and the pharaohs who followed changed Egypt into an empire that stretched from Syria to Nubia\*. Their military operations were very expensive, but gold mines in the Near East and in the desert areas east of the Nile were a great source of income. The pharaohs could then build the magnificent temples of Luxor\* and Karnak\*. Though not really an aggressive people the Egyptians became gradually more and more involved\* in long wars against various attackers. Finally the Persians overran Egypt. They were defeated by the Greek (Macedonian) Alexander the Great in 333 BC. After his death, Ptolemy, one of his generals, took power in Egypt. The last of the Ptolemys, Cleopatra, had great plans and was very astute\*. She sought Roman support for Egypt and began a close relationship with the Roman politician and commander Julius Caesar, with whom she had a son, called Caesarion. After Caesar's murder (44 BC), she tried to win over Mark Antony, who had become the leading Roman commander. Antony, however, was defeated by Octavian, another powerful Roman commander. After this Cleopatra decided to kill herself rather than to give up to Octavian. From 30 BC Egypt became part of the Roman Empire. The long history of pharaonic Egypt was over.

## **The River of Life**

The river Nile is the most important geographical feature\* of Egypt. The river rises south of the equator and has a length of about 6,600 km. In Egypt it runs through a desert area of about 1,100 km. In the summer, after heavy tropical rains in the Upper Nile Basin (East Africa), the river would swell. The floods would reach Egypt and the river rise. When the water went down after about 60 days it would leave black mud on both sides of the river which was good for growing plants. Therefore the Egyptians called the river valley and their country as a whole ‘The Black Land’. The desert, i. e. the sandy and rocky area around it, was named ‘The Red Land’. With the Nile flooding farming became possible in the dry and hot country on a strip of land from 6 to 20 km wide. To make the best use of the water the people had learned to build dykes\* and canals. In catch basins the water could be kept for about forty days before it ran off. To raise water from the river to the canal and from lower to higher canals people used various means, such as the shadoof. Herodotus\* was right when he referred to Egypt as a gift of the Nile. The flooding and the watering of the fields in general allowed great harvests. The surplus production of food, i.e. a production that is higher than actually needed, made it possible that not everybody had to work in the fields.

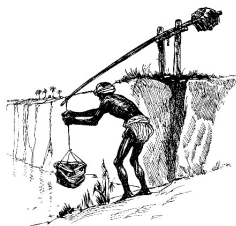


Image 1: shadoof; from Wikimedia Commons ; image in public domain , copyright expired; Illustration of a shaduf from Mitton, G. E.: "Round the Wonderful World", Image from Project Gutenberg EBook, A. S. Forrest

Some people could for example practice a craft, e. g. making pots (a potter) or be employed in service. For farming the people would use wooden ploughs\*, drawn by oxen. When the soft soil had been turned, seed\* was scattered\* onto the fields. Then animals, goats\* and sheep, would trample it into the ground. Apart from being important for farming the Nile was also the waterway for transport, as there was no real road system. Then the river was useful because of its fish. So you would see fishermen in their boats made of papyrus. This plant was also used to make paper. But you would not only find fish in the river, but also crocodiles and hippos\*. Crocodiles were life-threatening and hippos were disliked very much as they would run into the fields and trample the plants.

The Egyptians depended very much on the Nile flooding. So each year they would watch out for signs of the water rising. By carefully watching the regular flooding, which roughly happened in an interval of 365 days, people developed a natural calendar. Though not quite accurate this calendar was still comparatively the best one in the ancient world.

## **The ‘Great House’ and the ‘Eternal\* Home’**

The word ‘pharaoh’ was used in the Old Testament. It comes from Old Egyptian ‘pere’o’, which means ‘great house’ or ‘royal palace’. As a pharaoh was thought to be godlike, his personal name was much too holy with which to address him. In the course of time ‘pharaoh’ became a word for king and was used the same in modern times the White House is used for the US Government. As a pharaoh was the king of Upper and Lower Egypt he wore two crowns,

a white one for Upper Egypt and a red one for Lower Egypt. The royal symbols were a crook\* which it looked like a shepherd's staff and a flail\*. The pharaoh's most important duty was to win the support of the gods for his country and himself, so he looked after all important religious festivals himself. He was the head of the government; he made laws, he decided what was right or wrong and led the army. Ordinary people, who had the honour to be received by him, had to approach him in a very respectful manner. They had to kneel down before they were allowed to speak to him.

As the Egyptians depended so much on the Nile it was an absolute necessity to have an excellent organisation for all the work in connection with the Nile flooding. To control all this, the pharaoh was helped by a lot of people. His chief helpers were two viziers\*. The vizier had to see that the pharaoh's orders were carried out and he had to keep him informed. One of the vizier's main duties was to control the archives, the place where all important documents, such as royal decrees (orders), were kept, so it was possible to check what people had to hand in as taxes. The vizier also kept close contact with the local governors of the districts. Such contacts would also stop them from becoming a threat to the pharaoh's position.

Below the viziers was the large group of royal scribes (writers). Other scribes worked in temples or private estates\*. They had to control orders and did all the record keeping. They recorded nearly everything, especially how many taxes people had to pay. They wrote reports on the progress of temples or pyramids the pharaoh was building, and they were the authors of historical texts and other documents. As there was only a very small number of people who were able to read and write, ordinary people needed the service of a scribe if they wanted to have something written or read out to them. The importance of the scribe and the high opinion people had of him is shown by the fact that he was often the subject in ancient Egyptian art.

Later, when the pyramid was finished, the ramp was taken away. After the pharaoh's death his coffin was moved inside and the entrance blocked and hidden.

### ***The Life Here...***

The large majority of Egyptians were peasants, i. e. people who worked at farming. They were not really landowning people, but dependent on big landowners. The peasants had to work hard to grow enough food to live on. Like everybody else they also had pay taxes, usually in the form of farm produce, such as animals or corn. Many lived in fear of the tax-gatherers. Each year these officials measured the fields and counted the animals. Some peasants managed to drive their goats or sheep into desert or mountain areas before the arrival of the officials. If they were caught, they were punished severely\*. However, if the harvest was bad, the pharaoh took care that people were given corn from his store houses. Workers were usually also supported and paid with natural produce. At certain hard times the pay seemed to have become a problem; corruption of officials was part of the problem, too. So in the year 1156 BC the first recorded strike in history took place. As workers had not been given their

rations for two months they walked out of the building site of a temple for Ramses III. The conflict was settled when the rations were handed out regularly again.

Most of the poorer people (peasants, farmhands and labourers) lived in houses made of brick or mud. The roofs were covered with palm leaves. Well-to-do people often had two-storey houses (ground floor and an upper floor) and gardens and trees to protect them from the sun. They also owned a pool. Their servants lived in separate buildings.

Often silos for storing corn also belonged to the estates. Except for fairly comfortable beds, there was little furniture in the rooms. There were no drains under the house, with no pipes for dirty water to flow off; servants had to empty the toilet bowl into a canal.

Egyptians loved parties very much so the records tell us. In the houses of wealthy people singers and dancers entertained their guests; servants brought food around which was eaten with the fingers. Bread, a basic food in ancient Egypt, was served along with the meal. Ducks\* and geese seemed to have been the favourite meat courses. Wine was offered at the parties of richer people. Grape vines\* were grown on the estates of wealthy landowners. Most Egyptians, however, drank beer which was made from barley\* or wheat, mixed with date\* juice. People drank a lot, especially beer. So it is no wonder that men's figures seemed to be rather well-rounded.

In contrast to most ancient civilizations women could take part in public life and had a strong position in the household. The wife of a wealthy man, such as a landowner, for example, was called 'mistress of the house'. All furniture and household goods belonged to her. Her main task was to take care of the children. It was a custom to have only one wife; high officials and pharaohs, however, could have several wives at the same time. In general families had numerous children. The pharaoh Ramses II is said to have been the father of 162 children. But one has to keep in mind that the death rate among babies was very high.

Most children never went to any kind of school. Sons learned from their fathers and mothers taught their daughters how to organise the home. As noted earlier, people had a high opinion of scribes. So fathers tried to get their sons into temple schools to become civil servants or scribes. In school you had to study the classical Egyptian writing (hieroglyphics\*), classical texts and stories about the gods. A young civil servant also had to get a good knowledge in various fields of life which could be ship building or the digging of canals or other similar tasks. School was no fun really for young boys. Teachers were very strict. If the students did not study hard enough they were beaten. Much time during the first years of learning was taken up by studying hieroglyphics.

Questions like how to send messages to other people or places or how to keep a record of what was stored could perhaps explain why writing was invented. At first the Egyptians began using small pictures for words, i. e. depicting\* objects in the real world. This was enough for very simple messages, but to express more abstract ideas, such as colours or references to time, was difficult. Eventually people began to use pictures to stand for certain sounds. But

145 still, writing took up much time. In the classical period of writing (Middle Kingdom) a scribe had to know at least 700 different signs. From the beginning up to the end of pharaonic Egypt the number of hieroglyphs used in texts numbered more than 2,500, even up to 7,000 if all the known variations are included. Gradually a quicker form of writing developed, called hieratic\*, which was used on papyrus sheets. The traditional hieroglyphs were reserved for  
150 stone tablets or walls, and especially for holy texts. After the end of pharaonic rule the knowledge of ancient Egyptian writing was lost for centuries. Only in the 19th century did a French scholar succeed in deciphering the script. A stone found in Rosetta (Egypt), which contained a message in Greek and two kinds of Egyptian writing, was the key to the success.

Not everybody was able to become a civil servant or scribe or a trader and merchant.  
155 There were other possibilities, such as learning a craft. Craftsmen made all sorts of things such as furniture, boats, pots (from clay), and jewellery from silver, gold and precious stones.

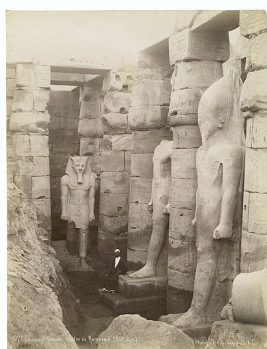


Image 2: (Luxor) Temple, statue de Ramses II (XIX dyn.). New York Public Library @ Flickr Commons(no known copyright restriction)

160 The Egyptians were not only great architects, as the pyramids show, but also knew the technique of stone working. Sculpture, the art of modelling figures in stone or metal, was probably the field in which they had the most impressive results. The statue of Ramses II at Thebes, near Luxor, is a well-known example. The age of Ramses II (1279 BC – 1213 BC) was an age of prosperity and power. All across Egypt this pharaoh built new temples, such as the one at Abu Simbel, which was cut into the rocky sides of the Nile Valley. The upper body of the Ramses statue from Thebes is about 2.5 metres high and weighs about 7 tons. The granite for this statue was taken from the quarry\* at Assuan, about 150 km up the Nile. The whole statue must have weighed about 20 tons. The huge single block was first roughly shaped and then moved on wooden sleds\* to a boat and floated down the Nile to Luxor, where the fine stone working took place. To put up the statue  
170 an enormous number of workers and a huge organisation was needed. Thousands of people had to be fed and housed.

### **... and The Life Here-after**

According to Egyptian belief man lived on after his death just as he had lived on earth. His body, however, must not be destroyed, so that his soul, which had left the body after dying, could find its way back. The Egyptians therefore preserved\* the dead by turning them into  
175 mummies\*. In a special treatment some inner parts of the body were taken out. Then a special salt, natron, actually an Egyptian word, was used to dry the body out. Finally it was wrapped up with linen bandages and the face covered with a mask. Often a so-called Book of the Dead was placed into the tombs of rich people. Its magic was supposed to help the dead on their way to the after-life. Everything a human being needed for living was put into the tomb. Only  
180 wealthy people, however, could pay the costs of mummification, and the tombs of the poor

looked much less magnificent. Poorer people were buried in the desert sand, covered with a mat and protected with a heavy stone.

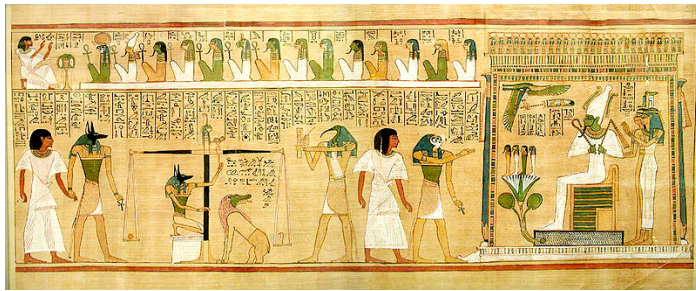


Image 3: In the Hall of Two Truths: weighing of the heart. From Wikimedia Commons; image in public domain; copyright expired.

Before he could continue his 'life', the dead had to face a trial\* before Osiris, the god of the underworld, in the Hall of the Two Truths. The spirit of the dead had to state whether he had lived as a good person. Anubis, the jackal-headed god,

tested his claim by balancing his heart on scales\* against the feather of truth. If he had lied, a terrible beast would swallow him. If the scales balanced, the spirit would pass into the after-world.

The Egyptians worshipped a lot of gods and goddesses, more than 700, some say up to 2000, among them many local gods. Besides Osiris and his wife Isis, there was Horus, their son. Then there was the sun god Re, thought to be the lord of creation, who was later combined with Amun Re, the god of the town of Thebes. Temples were the homes of the more important gods. Such a place was like a small town with library, school, workshops, store-rooms and living quarters for priests, craftsmen and workers. As a temple usually owned a lot of farmland, many people worked for it and depended on the food given by the temple. The main source of the wealth of temples were the taxes, the population had to pay. The most important part of the temple was a small dark room, the sanctuary\*. Only priests were allowed to enter it. Every morning a priest looked after the god, who was believed to live there. The priest sprinkled water on the statue of the god, changed its clothing, and offered it food and drink. Priests had a privileged position in society. The power of some high priests was nearly as great as that of the pharaoh.

All the ceremonies connected with the burial of the dead, the extravagant great tombs and all the ideas of life after death, could give the impression that the ancient Egyptians had no doubts that after death life would go on as before. But in the course of time people seemed to have become less sure. At the drinking parties of well-to-do Egyptians, so we read in Herodotus, it became the custom to show round the image of a dead body. Then the guests would be told to eat (and drink) and be cheerful. Otherwise, they were warned, they would die and look like the person in the image. And the text of a song, found in a tomb in Thebes, ends with the lines saying that no-one, that has passed away, has ever returned.

Certain topics and persons of ancient Egyptian history have been of special interest for many centuries. So we have Shakespeare's drama 'Antony and Cleopatra' and Hollywood films with Cleopatra. Then there are stories and films about mummies, often horror stories that seem to fascinate people. In Agatha Christie's detective novel 'Death on the Nile' (1937) one of the characters comments at the sight of the magnificent temple of Abu Simbel: "I'm

not much of a fellow for temples..., but a place like this [is simply fascinating] ... These old  
220 Pharaohs must have been wonderful fellows.”

Jürgen Plüer