

Ancient Egypt

The giant pyramids, temples, and tombs of ancient Egypt tell an exciting story about a nation that rose to power more than 5,000 years ago. This mighty civilization crumbled before conquering armies after 2,500 years of triumph and glory. The dry air and drifting desert sands have preserved many records of ancient Egypt until modern times.

The ancient Egyptians lived colorful, active, and eventful lives. Many were creative artists, skilled craftsmen, and adventurous explorers. Bold Egyptian warriors won many battles, and their rulers governed wide areas of the known world. The ancient Egyptians loved nature and had a lively sense of humor. They were among the first people to try to find answers to questions concerning man, nature, and God. They also considered the relationship of man to society, but regarded other people as savages. They captured and enslaved thousands of men and women from other lands.

The Greek historian Herodotus called Egypt the gift of the Nile, because floodwaters of this great river deposited rich, black soil on the land year after year. Egyptian farmers planted their crops in this fertile soil. Sandy plateaus and towering cliffs bordered the river valley. Beyond these waters stretched the barren wastes of the Sahara desert. On the edge of the desert, the Egyptians built giant pyramids as burial places for their pharaohs. They carved the Great Sphinx out of solid rock as a guardian of King Cheops's Great Pyramid at Giza. The ancient Egyptians called their country Kemet, which means black (after the land). The Greeks called the country Aigyptos, from the name Ha-ka-ptah, the main temple of the Egyptian capital at Memphis.

Many modern beliefs and ideals, as well as much of man's knowledge, had their origin in Egypt. The ancient Egyptians developed the world's first national government. Their religion was one of the first to emphasize a life after death. They produced an expressive art and literature. The Egyptians introduced stone architecture and made the first convenient writing material, papyrus. They developed a 365-day year and set up the basic methods of geometry and surgery.

The boundaries of ancient Egypt changed many times during its history. When the Kingdom of Egypt was formed in about 3100 B.C., it occupied only the fertile valley of the Nile River in northeastern Africa. The kingdom extended south about 680 miles from the Mediterranean Sea to the First Cataract (rapids) of the river. It averaged only 12 miles in width from the Nile delta to the First Cataract. Egypt covered about 8,000 square miles and was a little smaller than the state of Massachusetts.

In later years, ancient Egypt usually controlled neighboring areas around the Nile Valley, including oases (fertile green patches), in the desert to the west. It usually governed part of the Nile Valley south of the First Cataract, the Red Sea coast, and the western part of the Sinai Peninsula in Asia. At the height of its power, around 1450 B.C., Egypt claimed an empire that reached as far south as the Fourth Cataract in Nubia, a part of ancient Ethiopia, and as far northeast as the Euphrates River in western Asia.

Ancient Egypt was a lot less crowded than Modern Egypt. Historians believe that from one to eight million people lived in ancient Egypt. In Roman times, estimates set the figure at about six million. Most Egyptians lived near the Nile, with an average of 750 people per square mile. Today, the valley averages almost 2,400 people per square mile, although Egypt as a whole averages only 85.

The black-haired, dark-skinned ancient Egyptians were short and slender. They belong to the Mediterranean race of the Caucasoid (white) stock. As time went on, the Egyptians mixed with people from Asia, Negroes from other parts of Africa, and people from lands around the Mediterranean Sea.

The Egyptians were divided into four social classes. They were from most important: the royalty and nobles; artisans, craftsmen, and merchants; workers; and slaves. The professional army gradually became almost a separate class. Egypt had no fixed caste system. A person of the poorest class could rise to the highest offices in the land.

The ancient Egyptians spoke a mixed language. It included words from the Semitic language group of southwestern Asia and the Hamitic group of languages of northeastern Africa. The language died out of everyday use about a thousand years ago but the Coptic (Christian) Church still uses it.

No one knows just how the spoken language of ancient Egypt sounded. Written Egyptian developed from picture writing into an elaborate system of symbols called hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphics consisted of 24 alphabetic characters for consonants and semi-consonants. These characters were used in combination with many phonograms (sound-signs) and ideograms (sense-signs). Vowels were not written out. Hieroglyphic writing was carved or painted. Its ornamental character was particularly suitable for inscriptions on monuments. For everyday purposes, a simplified cursive form of hieroglyphics called hieratic was used. Hieratic could be rapidly written on light, easy-to-carry materials, such as papyrus and leather. The Egyptians called their writing the words of the gods. They claimed that one of their gods, Thoth, had invented it. Modern scholars first learned to read when they translated the writings on the Rosetta Stone. In Egyptian, the word pharaoh originally meant great house, but in the late 1300's B.C. it came to mean ruler of Egypt.

Education was seen as a different level of importance between classes. Most young boys learned their work from their fathers, or as apprentices in various trades. Boys of royal and wealthy families were trained to become priests or government officials. At an early age, they were placed in the schools for scribes at the capital. Priests controlled the schools. They required the students to memorize classic texts, take dictation, and learn to use the 700 characters of the Egyptian language. They also taught literature. Schoolboys practiced their writing by copying stories and proverbs. Archaeologists have found copybooks that these boys used for practicing their handwriting, although the number of people who could read and write was apparently quite small.

Religion appeared in every part of life in ancient Egypt. The Egyptians believed that gods and goddesses took part in every human activity from birth to death. For the Egyptian, the good life depended on obeying the commands of the gods. After someone died, the gods would judge how well the person had obeyed their directions. The Egyptians

believed that their king was a god who could keep the country prosperous by his divine powers.

In the earliest period, the Egyptians worshipped the forces of nature, such as wind and fire. As towns grew up, each adopted its own special god. In one part of the delta, the people worshipped Horus, the god of heaven. In another district, the people worshipped Osiris, the god of vegetation, who later became the god of the dead. Heliopolis, near Cairo, was the center for the worship of the sun god Re, or Ra. Heliopolis means city of the sun in Greek. About 2500 B.C., priests at Heliopolis developed the worship of Re as the nation's first state religion. Other members of Re's divine family included Osiris, and his wife, Isis; Set, the evil brother of Osiris, and his wife Nephthys; Shu, god of the air; Tefnut, goddess of moisture; Geb, god of earth; and Nut, goddess of the sky.

The people of Thebes worshipped Amon, or Ammon, the god of the air and fertility. When Thebes became the political center of the empire, the people worshipped Amon and Re together as Amon-Re.

The Egyptians believed that certain animals might serve individual gods in a special way. For example, they regarded the ram as acceptable to Amon, and chose on ram to be the temple animal of that god. Other sacred animals included the baboon, bull, cat, crocodile, and jackal.

The people of ancient Egypt took great care in preparing for life after death. They denied that death ended the existence of a person who had led a good life. They believed that the next world would be like Egypt in its richest and most enjoyable form. They built stone tombs and filled them with clothing, food, furnishings, and jewelry for use in the next world. They embalmed their dead and wrapped the bodies in layers of cloth. Preserved bodies were called mummies.

The Egyptians carved inscriptions on the walls of their tombs. They also wrote on the insides of the coffins. They placed papyrus copies of the Book of the Dead in the tombs to protect the spirits of the dead. The Book of the Dead contained spells and prayers.

The priests conducted the rituals and guarded the temples. They acquired much political power. For example, the king did not make them pay the corvée, a tax in labor that furnished the government with workers. The priests used thousands of people to work in the temples and divine lands.

Egyptian discoveries in mathematics and other sciences were rudimentary. The Egyptians used a system of counting by tens, but their system had no zeros. They could multiply and divide whole numbers, and reduce simple fractions. They used a series of simple fractions, such as $1/2$, $1/5$, and $1/10$ to build up complex ones, such as $4/5$. The Egyptians could determine areas and calculate the volumes of objects. They were among the first people to survey land. The floodwaters of the Nile washed away the boundaries of farms every year, and new ones had to be fixed by surveying. The Egyptians measured distances accurately with equally spaced knots tied in long ropes. They used a cubit, the length of a man's forearm, as a standard of measurement. They worked out the foundations of geometry and arithmetic.

The Egyptians also pioneered in the field of astronomy. They distinguished between planets and stars, and devised a 365-day calendar.

In medicine and surgery, the Egyptians recognized the importance of the heart and its relation to other parts of the body. They related the

speed of a person's heartbeat to his general physical condition. They also know how to sew and dress wounds.