

Egyptian Notes AP World History

“The Gift of the Nile:” This phrase first coined by the Greek historian Herodotus is quite fitting as no other society on the earth in human history has been as dependent on one geographical feature as the Egyptians were the Nile. In fact history has shown us (see link) that Egyptian history is dependent on the flooding cycle of the Nile. Seasons of high flooding in which the Nile overflows her banks and leaves a hyper-fertile layer of silt over the otherwise barren landscape provides Egypt with her periods of high development and sees her flourish as a civilization. Those periods where the Nile either doesn't flood or engages in flooding that is excessive finds that the Egyptians as a society were not in a good situation and the crests in Egyptian civilization are correlated to the low points along the flood plane. The Nile still plays a huge role in the daily life of Egyptian society. Egyptian agriculture, the economic basis of the society was dependent on the Nile without her gifts of silt, the crops were sure to be stagnant and insufficient to the Empire's needs.

Nile's broad ranging impacts: as a result of the Egyptian dependence of the Nile she not only becomes economically dependent upon the Nile but socially, religiously, and militarily as well. As the song on 23 illustrates the Nile became the epicenter of Egyptian life, present in religious tales, acted as a military barrier and even became an indicator of the Pharaoh's performance in the eyes of Osiris to be interpreted by the people of the Nile Valley.

Impact of the River on Civilizations: not to discount the collective contributions of the Yellow, Tigris, Euphrates and Indus to their respective civilizations it is clear that the Nile meant more to her society than these other great rivers. As a result of her impacts providing abundant raw materials and at times a great surplus of food the Nile allowed the Egyptians to strike a vastly different course than her civilized counterparts. Egypt became highly internalized, seeking few outside contacts as a result of her ability to be self-sufficient. Outside contacts rarely advanced beyond the “big pond”, the Mediterranean Sea to Lebanon and the Sinai peninsula. It is likely that the Mesopotamian influence (Cultural Diffusion) was achieved by travelers and military invasions than it was through the commercial avenues more accustomed to Ancient Times.

Egypt's God-King: (see fables) As Egypt was unified into a cohesive whole with the Nile at her center, Egypt became politically and religiously unified under a theocratic king. Menes united Egypt in 3100 BC and began Dynastic Leadership in Egypt. Egyptian history is rarely assessed on the dynastic time scale rather using descriptors such as old, intermediate and new are more often used and are less confusing. The intermediate periods are those during which Egyptian civilization floundered and fluttered, most of the time as a result of the Nile's irregular flooding patterns.

Classification of Egyptian History

Period	Dates	Significant Events
Archaic:	3100-2600 BC	Unification of Egypt
Old Kingdom	2660-2180 BC	Construction of the pyramids
First Intermediate	2180-2080 BC	Political Chaos
Middle Kingdom	2080-1640 BC	Recovery and Political Stability
Second Intermediate	1640-1570 BC	Invasion of the Hyskos
New Kingdom	1570-1075 BC	Creation of an Egyptian Empire, King Tut/Religious Chaos.
Final Decline	1075-626 BC	Invasion of numerous groups, crushed by Assyrians.

Egyptian politics, the Nile, and religion slowly became intertwined in Egyptian society. The Egyptians gradually developed a complex hierarchy of gods that rivaled the complexity of the Greek mythological system and explained phenomenon through fables and stories, such as those read in class. Here is a brief explanation as to how Egyptian religion, the Nile, and the theocracy became intertwined. At the top of Egyptian Deities is Osiris: the goddess of fertility who dies each year and his resurrected by his wife Isis (the god of Magic amongst other distinctions). Osiris eventually becomes king of the dead and is given the task of assessing entrance into the afterlife (a complexity of Egyptian religion). His assistant in the afterlife was Anubis whom we may recognize as the Jackal headed god. His brother was the “dark figure” in Egyptian lore Seth. Seth attempts to overthrow the higher ranking Osiris by killing him and spreading over the kingdom in 13 pieces, Isis is able to magically restore the parts and recreate her husband and brother Osiris...with one notable piece missing which was eaten by a fish in the Nile, another representation of the Nile’s fertility. Gradually the gods expanded to include Re, Ra, Amon, and Aton all representations (many localized) of the Sun God. The link between the Pharaoh and the Gods was the Falcon headed god Horus. Horus as the son of the king of God’s Osiris saw to it that the devout, just Pharaoh became one with Osiris after his death. Thus, like Hinduism there is a representation of people unifying with the main deity post mortem. Here gives us the importance of the Pharaoh, he was the bridge between the Gods and Egypt, nature and society, the force that connected them. It was widely believed that the success of Egypt was then dependent on the power of the Pharaoh and his standing with Osiris and Horus...was he able to keep the Nile at certain levels, maintain the status of Egyptian climate? If all was well, the interconnected nature of this relationship was well, if not...well the Pharaoh must

have lost his mandate from Osiris? In that event, turmoil and unrest ruled and other religions began to develop promising the fulfillment of the Nile's flooding patterns. Given the vast importance of the Pharaoh he was certainly treated with reverence and grandeur. In addition, it was important that his soul or Ka united itself with Osiris as to guarantee a "working relationship" between Gods and Egypt, hence the construction of elaborate mausoleums known as Pyramids.

The Egyptian: The life of a commoner in Ancient Egypt was no picnic; they were firmly planted at the bottom of Egyptian social society. They bore a heavy burden of taxation, worked the fields the hardest, and received little chance of religious salvation in return. While it is clear the Egyptian was not a "slave" in the formal sense of the world, their lives may have resembled an African American in the 1870's and 1880's in the US. A "freeman" by technical definition but still enslaved in practice, not formally but with little choice at exerting their free status. There was no caste system and common people could ascend with talent. Young men were often drafted into the Army with the purpose of fighting, but since the Egyptians were not a military force like the Assyrians or Persians they spent most of their time digging canals and building pyramids. These "harsh rules of order" were vital to Egyptian society, for without them...you had chaos.

The Hyksos: Not all of Egypt's intermediate periods were caused by the Nile and her agricultural disturbances or Pharaonic disturbances as a result of those disturbances. One in specific was caused by a foreign invasion, an invasion that to historians seems unlikely due to the fact that Egypt is so well protected in terms of natural borders. Mediterranean sea to the North, the vicious Nile as her spine, the Red Sea/Persian Gulf to her East and harsh deserts to the West and South. The Hyksos (Egyptian for Ruler of the Upland) were part of the massive migration of Semitic peoples that began in the Arabian Peninsula. The tribal movements included tops in Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The movements of these peoples is spotty, we know little about their invasions and tactics outside of the fact that they entered Egypt from modern day Israel. The trend of Mesopotamian conquests was set, a culture emerged, and facilitated itself with the maiden culture of the region as a result of its perceived superiority (in certain areas-a synthesis usually occurred.) Accounts of the day question whether these people even needed to fight a battle to rule the Egyptians, who were no doubt stunned and confused by their initial experience into conquest by a foreign power. Historians now believe that the invasion of the Hyksos was a gradual migration that provided Egyptians with insights into the Bronze Age of Mesopotamian culture. Their use of long bows and chariots revolutionized Egyptian warfare. Perhaps the Hyksos themselves experienced the greatest cultural change, as it is widely believed that the people assimilated into Egyptian society, even adopting Egyptian faith.

The New Kingdom: The New Kingdom saw the rise of the 18th dynasty of Egyptian Pharaoh's, Egypt's greatest. Ahmose (1558 BC) pushed them out, Thutmose I (1512 BC) subdued the Nubians in the South and Thutmose III (1490 BC) conquered Palestine and Syria. The New Kingdom is characterized by enormous wealth and imperialism. Slavery became a characteristic of Egyptian civilization; the Pharaoh's became increasingly militaristic under Thutmose III who established the first

conquestal military force. Egypt became an empire. Her religion and customs spread throughout Northern Africa and into Mesopotamia. Egyptian society became increasingly grandeur, in fact perhaps beyond even her expansive means.

Akhenaton: Religious Revolutionary. Perhaps the most interesting Pharaoh was Akhenaton, whose name translates into resembling Aton. Aton was an obscure religious cult whose focus was the sun disk, Aton. Not the more commonly accepted Ra (Re) but a sun disk Aton. This religious revolutionary and his beautiful wife Nefertiti encouraged an ultimately mandated this new monotheistic faith. (I point out Nefertiti's beauty, because it is widely noted that Akhenaton was a very odd, sickly looking figure.) The faith endorsed by Akhenaton and Nefertiti preached monotheism or belief in one god, the moral scruples and prescribed behaviors gave it a resemblance to early Christianity. The two proceeded to build the world's greatest religious center the Karnack. The reasons for this conversion are mixed, many historians credit Akhenaton (Amenhotep IV is his dynastic name) with honestly prescribing to these religious ideals, others credit him with being an astute politician who recognized that society was threatened by the powerful priests of each god whether it Amon or Re (new king of the gods). The localized priests became very powerful during intermediate periods where the Pharaoh had lost his authority; in certain cases these priests had become Pharaoh's. So it is likely that Akhenaton advocated his religion in part because it provided no religious threat to him, abdicated him in part from the tense relationship expected of him to Osiris and placed him as the religious zenith in Egypt. The transformation to Aton from Amon Re and the past (Osiris) was painful for many Egyptians and they didn't care for it as a rule. After Akhenaton's death his successor Tutankhamen (at 9) provided the Priests with the vehicle they needed to make the change back to the old religion, which he did bringing himself ill-deserved fame and historical glory that is less indicative of his rule and more indicative of his glorious treasure.

New Challenge to the Egyptians: The Hittites. The Hittites had long been established in Turkey (Anatolia) and were a regional power that during the New Kingdom began to expand its borders. They were one of the Indo-Europeans, a group of people who had migrated into Persia, India, and Asia as part of the world's most impressive massive migration. The movements included the foundation and diffusion of almost all of the world's non-oriental languages including English, Greek, Latin, Persian, and Sanskrit. Their original whereabouts remains at this time a mystery. It is widely believed that the migration started somewhere in the region above the Black Sea in central Asia. The migration of Indo-Europeans resulted in the transformation and settlement of Europe, Middle East, and Asia.

Rise of the Hittites. The Hittite seemed to have arrived peacefully in the region of Anatolia diffusing itself peacefully around 2700 BC. Their mastery of Iron technology set the Hittites apart from everyone else in the region and enabled them to establish military and cultural superiority over certain aspects of the region. During the 19th century the original inhabitants of Anatolia declared suicidal war against the Hittites and exhausting the region. The Hittite king Hattustilis built a citadel (fortified high ground at Hattusas and led the Hittites against the neighboring invaders. Hattustilis grandson Mursilis extended the conquest as far as Babylon, the Hittites were not alone in their conquest counting on the Kassites for military aid.

The kingdom was plunged into chaos as Mursilis was assassinated after the Kassite/Hittite victory. Hittite society was based on small communal societies ruled by kings and had the presence of slavery. The class structure was strict and harsh with the King at the top, followed by his aristocracy, the king's relatives, warriors (first assembly The Pankus which could hear claims from the King but had no decision making capacity), farmers, and slaves. The King was the supreme priest, chief, and diplomat. The society was based on Cuneiform tablet legal codes as established by legal codes and adopted other advancements of Mesopotamian society.

The Era of Hittite Greatness: like the Egyptians the Hittites produced an energetic line of kings that saved the empire. They restored order to the empire by purging and making order of the aristocracy and expanding the empire. Two empires clashed, Egypt and Hittites. Around 1300 BC the Hittites stopped the Egyptian army of Ramses II at the battle of Kadesh in Syria. The two giants fought to a standstill. Following this standstill was friendship and an alliance. Their brotherhood brought the Babylonians into the mix and the three empires treated themselves as brothers. Eventually the Hittites diffused much of the knowledge of the Near East to the burgeoning power of the Greeks.

The fall of Empires: The greatest of the Egyptian kings in the New Kingdom was the self-absorbed womanizer Ramses II (The Great). Ramses used the peace after Kadesh to promote peace and prosperity in the region and strengthened the foreign trade and wealth of the empire. Consequently he began the greatest building projects Egypt has seen in the wake of his own glory. Unfortunately, his grandeur was more than the empire could take especially considering the fact he ruled for an astonishing 67 years. The large empires of the near east were crushed by a series of invaders; in Egypt it was the mysterious sea peoples of which nothing is known.

The Demise of Egypt: The invasion of the Sea Peoples crippled Egypt but did not bring her to an end. (Page 39-quote.) The third intermediate period (or final decline) lasted roughly 400 years. The decline of Egypt was especially difficult in foreign affairs. The Pharaoh's of this period found it difficult to hold serve in foreign affairs. Egyptians suffered a 400-year period of political chaos that was the equivalent of a "Dark Age". The invasion of the Sea Peoples left Egypt without a centralized authority to rule it, a far cry from the greatness of the 18th dynasty, in this case Egypt consisted of warring fragmented kingdoms. Egypt fell prey to invasions from its African neighbors including Libya from the West, and Nubia from the South. In fact during the period from 950-730 BC Egypt was ruled by a Libyan lineage of pharaohs. The Libyans urbanized the Egyptian society while taking a huge majority of Egyptian religion and culture and making it their own. Nubian influence into the region was deep but not destructive, again a wholesale embrace of Egyptian greatness in culture, arts and religion was noted. The Mesopotamian model was in force, conquer and assimilate as opposed to conquer and destroy. The void left by the demise of Egypt led to the birth of a new empire in the region...the Kush which sprung out of the Sudan. The Kush worshiped Egyptian gods, used Hieroglyph's, and other aspects of Egyptian culture. In the 7th century BC, Egypt recovered enough to unify itself under an Egyptian pharaoh. However, the recovery will not lead to

empire and will be short lived as in 626 BC the Egyptians will be mercilessly crushed by the Near East military force of the Assyrians. Bringing an end to the glory of Egypt.