Ancient Egyptian Civilization

North Africa's landscape is covered by the world's largest hot desert--the Sahara.  This massive Arid climate makes it a strange place for a large population of people.  Most of the Sahara is too harsh for people to live. The Nile Valley, coastal areas, and the rare oases (plural for oasis) provide the only places that can support life.  An oasis is an area of natural water in a desert that allows plant life. The Nile is the world’s longest river. It flows north through the Sahara creating a long oasis in the desert eventually dumping into the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile’s water comes mainly from highland areas near the center of Africa that receives frequent rain, which flows north, downhill into the Nile.  The Nile is divided into sections by cataracts.  A cataract is a rocky area that creates a waterfall or rapids.  There are six cataracts in the Nile river.

For thousands of years, the Nile flooded when the rainy season began in Central Africa. The Nile flowed over the river banks and after several months it soaked into the ground, evaporated or flowed into the Mediterranean. As the water level lowered, it left behind rich, fertile soil for farmers. The flooding usually began around June and it happened every year, so it was a dependable source of water and fertilizer for farmers. Egyptians dug canals to pull water out of the flooded river, which they saved for irrigation later on. It didn’t rain in the Sahara, so Egyptians relied completely on irrigation from the Nile to farm. Fresh water, irrigation, fertile soil – this is why people called it the “gift” of the NileFor thousands of years, the Nile flooded when the rainy season began in Central Africa. The Nile flowed over the river banks and after several months it soaked into the ground, evaporated or flowed into the Mediterranean. As the water level lowered, it left behind rich, fertile soil for farmers. The flooding usually began around June and it happened every year, so it was a dependable source of water and fertilizer for farmers. Egyptians dug canals to pull water out of the flooded river, which they saved for irrigation later on. It didn’t rain in the Sahara, so Egyptians relied completely on irrigation from the Nile to farm. Fresh water, irrigation, fertile soil – this is why people called it the “gift” of the Nile

10,000 years ago North Africa was a grassland with many plants and animals.  North Africa took its current desert form around 6000 BCE. Around 6000 BCE the climate began to change, which might explain why humans changed from hunting and gathering to farming.  Before civilization, early humans came to the Nile River to hunt, fish, and gather food, but gradually as people learned to farm and domesticate animals, and therefore live in permanent settlements, areas around the Nile became more crowded. Several towns grew and eventually, kingdoms developed. The change from nomadic hunter-gatherers to civilized living followed the same pattern as other places around the world: farming provided extra food, which allowed the division of labor, which allows the development of government and religion and creates social classes.

We know so much about the Egyptians because there are so many written resources and because their culture lasted so long with few interruptions.  The Mesopotamian culture was constantly changing and disrupted by war.  Another reason we know so much about Egypt is that they made their architecture out of stone, which has lasted for the most part.

Religion was the center of Egyptian life.  Egyptians believed in many Gods, so they were polytheistic.  The Egyptian king was the absolute ruler and owner of all the land, water, people, etc. in his or her kingdom.  Later Egyptians would call their kings “pharaoh”.  Egyptian people believed the pharaoh was a living God, so the Egyptians developed a theocracy or a government ruled by religious leaders.  This is important to understanding why Egyptian people were so willing to give their grain to the Pharaoh and build him or her incredible temples—they thought the Pharaoh was a living God that would be with them forever in eternity.  The first pharaohs established a dynasty, or family control of the government, and a capital city of Memphis from which they could control the work force, agriculture, and trade routes in and out of Egypt.  A total of 31 dynasties controlled Egypt during nearly 4000 years of history.  Egyptians had many religious rituals and ceremonies.  The most well-known ritual was mummification.  Egyptians believed in life after death, and they wanted the body to look life-like.  Anyone could be mummified if they had enough money.  First, they removed the organs.  Then they removed as much moisture from the body as possible using a salt called natron to preserve the body and then wrapped it in linen cloth.  The body was placed in a sarcophagus, which is similar to a coffin.

Egyptians were a very advanced civilization due to their inventions and technology.  Egyptians developed a writing system called Hieroglyphics that combined pictures and symbols.  Eventually, they created an alphabet from their symbols.  In 1822 CE a European explorer found what is called the Rosetta Stone--a stone with the same message written in 3 different languages, which finally allowed historians to translate ancient Hieroglyphics. Egyptians developed a 365-day calendar and used a number system based on 10. Egyptians figured out amazing ways to cut stone to use in their temples and obelisks.  An obelisk is a tall narrow monument that becomes more narrow as it goes up.  They created a writing material similar to a paper called papyrus from reeds found in the Nile.  Egyptians were excellent ship builders and excelled at mathematics.  They used fractions, decimals, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division and basic ideas of geometry.

Egyptian life depended on what social class you were a part of.  At the top of society was the Pharaoh.  Below the Pharaoh was the royal court (Pharaoh's family), high priests, government officials, and scribes and nobles (rich land owners).  Below them were doctors and engineers, craftsman, and then farmers and unskilled workers at the bottom.  Egyptians did use some slaves, but slavery is hardly mentioned in their writings.  Most people lived in mud-brick homes.  Women raised the children and men usually made an income for the family.  Egyptians enjoyed music, dancing, and playing games such as Senet. When farmers were not working the fields they often worked on construction projects including temples and irrigation canals.  Bread was the main food source, but they would have eaten meat during festivals.