

Early Dynastic Period 3050–2686 BC

The Early Dynastic Period was approximately contemporary to the early Sumerian-Akkadian civilisation of Mesopotamia and of ancient Elam. The third-century BC Egyptian priest Manetho grouped the long line of kings from Menes to his own time into 30 dynasties, a system still used today. He began his official history with the king named "Meni" (or Menes in Greek) who was believed to have united the two kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt.[20]

The transition to a unified state happened more gradually than ancient Egyptian writers represented, and there is no contemporary record of Menes. Some scholars now believe, however, that the mythical Menes may have been the king Narmer, who is depicted wearing royal regalia on the ceremonial Narmer Palette, in a symbolic act of unification.[22] In the Early Dynastic Period, which began about 3000 BC, the first of the Dynastic kings solidified control over lower Egypt by establishing a capital at Memphis, from which he could control the labour force and agriculture of the fertile delta region, as well as the lucrative and critical trade routes to the Levant. The increasing power and wealth of the kings during the early dynastic period was reflected in their elaborate mastaba tombs and mortuary cult structures at Abydos, which were used to celebrate the deified king after his death.[23] The strong institution of kingship developed by the kings served to legitimize state control over the land, labour, and resources that were essential to the survival and growth of ancient Egyptian civilization.[24]

Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BC)

Main article: Old Kingdom of Egypt

Major advances in architecture, art, and technology were made during the Old Kingdom, fueled by the increased agricultural productivity and resulting population, made possible by a well-developed central administration.[25] Some of ancient Egypt's crowning achievements, the Giza pyramids and

Great Sphinx, were constructed during the Old Kingdom. Under the direction of the vizier, state officials collected taxes, coordinated irrigation projects to improve crop yield, drafted peasants to work on construction projects, and established a justice system to maintain peace and order.[26]

With the rising importance of central administration in Egypt a new class of educated scribes and officials arose who were granted estates by the king in payment for their services. Kings also made land grants to their mortuary cults and local temples, to ensure that these institutions had the resources to worship the king after his death. Scholars believe that five centuries of these practices slowly eroded the economic vitality of Egypt, and that the economy could no longer afford to support a large centralized administration.[27] As the power of the kings diminished, regional governors called nomarchs began to challenge the supremacy of the office of king. This, coupled with severe droughts between 2200 and 2150 BC,[28] is believed to have caused the country to enter the 140-year period of famine and strife known as the First Intermediate Period.[29]