

## First Intermediate Period (2181–1991 BC)

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After Egypt's central government collapsed at the end of the Old Kingdom, the administration could no longer support or stabilize the country's economy. Regional governors could not rely on the king for help in times of crisis, and the ensuing food shortages and political disputes escalated into famines and small-scale civil wars. Yet despite difficult problems, local leaders, owing no tribute to the king, used their new-found independence to establish a thriving culture in the provinces. Once in control of their own resources, the provinces became economically richer—which was demonstrated by larger and better burials among all social classes.[30] In bursts of creativity, provincial artisans adopted and adapted cultural motifs formerly restricted to the royalty of the Old Kingdom, and scribes developed literary styles that expressed the optimism and originality of the period.[31]

Free from their loyalties to the king, local rulers began competing with each other for territorial control and political power. By 2160 BC, rulers in Herakleopolis controlled Lower Egypt in the north, while a rival clan based in Thebes, the Intef family, took control of Upper Egypt in the south. As the Intefs grew in power and expanded their control northward, a clash between the two rival dynasties became inevitable. Around 2055 BC the northern Theban forces under Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II finally defeated the Herakleopolitan rulers, reuniting the Two Lands. They inaugurated a period of economic and cultural renaissance known as the Middle Kingdom.[32]

## Middle Kingdom 2134–1690 BC

The kings of the Middle Kingdom restored the country's stability and prosperity, thereby stimulating a resurgence of art, literature, and monumental building projects.[33] Mentuhotep II and his Eleventh Dynasty successors ruled from Thebes, but the vizier Amenemhat I, upon assuming the kingship at the beginning of the Twelfth Dynasty around 1985 BC, shifted the kingdom's capital to the city of

Itjtawy, located in Faiyum.[34] From Itjtawy, the kings of the Twelfth Dynasty undertook a far-sighted land reclamation and irrigation scheme to increase agricultural output in the region. Moreover, the military reconquered territory in Nubia that was rich in quarries and gold mines, while laborers built a defensive structure in the Eastern Delta, called the "Walls-of-the-Ruler", to defend against foreign attack.[35]

With the kings having secured the country militarily and politically and with vast agricultural and mineral wealth at their disposal, the nation's population, arts, and religion flourished. In contrast to elitist Old Kingdom attitudes towards the gods, the Middle Kingdom displayed an increase in expressions of personal piety.[36] Middle Kingdom literature featured sophisticated themes and characters written in a confident, eloquent style.[31] The relief and portrait sculpture of the period captured subtle, individual details that reached new heights of technical sophistication.[37]

The last great ruler of the Middle Kingdom, Amenemhat III, allowed Semitic-speaking Canaanite settlers from the Near East into the Delta region to provide a sufficient labour force for his especially active mining and building campaigns. These ambitious building and mining activities, however, combined with severe Nile floods later in his reign, strained the economy and precipitated the slow decline into the Second Intermediate Period during the later Thirteenth and Fourteenth dynasties. During this decline, the Canaanite settlers began to assume greater control of the Delta region, eventually coming to power in Egypt as the Hyksos.[38]

## Second Intermediate Period (1674–1549 BC) and the Hyksos

Around 1785 BC, as the power of the Middle Kingdom kings weakened, a Western Asian people called the Hyksos, who had already settled in the Delta, seized control of Egypt and established their capital at Avaris, forcing the former central government to retreat to Thebes. The king was

treated as a vassal and expected to pay tribute.[39] The Hyksos ("foreign rulers") retained Egyptian models of government and identified as kings, thereby integrating Egyptian elements into their culture. They and other invaders introduced new tools of warfare into Egypt, most notably the composite bow and the horse-drawn chariot.[40]

After retreating south, the native Theban kings found themselves trapped between the Canaanite Hyksos ruling the north and the Hyksos' Nubian allies, the Kushites, to the south. After years of vassalage, Thebes gathered enough strength to challenge the Hyksos in a conflict that lasted more than 30 years, until 1555 BC.[39] The kings Seqenenre Tao II and Kamose were ultimately able to defeat the Nubians to the south of Egypt, but failed to defeat the Hyksos. That task fell to Kamose's successor, Ahmose I, who successfully waged a series of campaigns that permanently eradicated the Hyksos' presence in Egypt. He established a new dynasty and, in the New Kingdom that followed, the military became a central priority for the kings, who sought to expand Egypt's borders and attempted to gain mastery of the Near East.[41]

### New Kingdom (1549–1069 BC)

The New Kingdom pharaohs established a period of unprecedented prosperity by securing their borders and strengthening diplomatic ties with their neighbours, including the Mitanni Empire, Assyria, and Canaan. Military campaigns waged under Tuthmosis I and his grandson Tuthmosis III extended the influence of the pharaohs to the largest empire Egypt had ever seen. Beginning with Merneptah the rulers of Egypt adopted the title of pharaoh.

Between their reigns, Hatshepsut, a queen who established herself as pharaoh, launched many building projects, including restoration of temples damaged by the Hyksos, and sent trading expeditions to Punt and the Sinai.[42] When Tuthmosis III died in 1425 BC, Egypt had an empire

extending from Niya in north west Syria to the Fourth Cataract of the Nile in Nubia, cementing loyalties and opening access to critical imports such as bronze and wood.[43]

The New Kingdom pharaohs began a large-scale building campaign to promote the god Amun, whose growing cult was based in Karnak. They also constructed monuments to glorify their own achievements, both real and imagined. The Karnak temple is the largest Egyptian temple ever built.[44]

Around 1350 BC, the stability of the New Kingdom was threatened when Amenhotep IV ascended the throne and instituted a series of radical and chaotic reforms. Changing his name to Akhenaten, he touted the previously obscure sun deity Aten as the supreme deity, suppressed the worship of most other deities, and moved the capital to the new city of Akhetaten (modern-day Amarna).[45] He was devoted to his new religion and artistic style. After his death, the cult of the Aten was quickly abandoned and the traditional religious order restored. The subsequent pharaohs, Tutankhamun, Ay, and Horemheb, worked to erase all mention of Akhenaten's heresy, now known as the Amarna Period.[46]

Around 1279 BC, Ramesses II, also known as Ramesses the Great, ascended the throne, and went on to build more temples, erect more statues and obelisks, and sire more children than any other pharaoh in history.[a] A bold military leader, Ramesses II led his army against the Hittites in the Battle of Kadesh (in modern Syria) and, after fighting to a stalemate, finally agreed to the first recorded peace treaty, around 1258 BC.[47]

Egypt's wealth, however, made it a tempting target for invasion, particularly by the Libyan Berbers to the west, and the Sea Peoples, a conjectured confederation of seafarers from the Aegean Sea.[b] Initially, the military was able to repel these invasions, but Egypt eventually lost control of its

remaining territories in southern Canaan, much of it falling to the Assyrians. The effects of external threats were exacerbated by internal problems such as corruption, tomb robbery, and civil unrest. After regaining their power, the high priests at the temple of Amun in Thebes accumulated vast tracts of land and wealth, and their expanded power splintered the country during the Third Intermediate Period.[48]