

Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt was a civilization of ancient North Africa, concentrated along the lower reaches of the Nile River, situated in the place that is now the country Egypt. Ancient Egyptian civilization followed prehistoric Egypt and coalesced around 3100 BC (according to conventional Egyptian chronology)[1] with the political unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under Menes (often identified with Narmer).[2] The history of ancient Egypt occurred as a series of stable kingdoms, separated by periods of relative instability known as Intermediate Periods: the Old Kingdom of the Early Bronze Age, the Middle Kingdom of the Middle Bronze Age and the New Kingdom of the Late Bronze Age.

Egypt reached the pinnacle of its power in the New Kingdom, ruling much of Nubia and a sizable portion of the Near East, after which it entered a period of slow decline. During the course of its history Egypt was invaded or conquered by a number of foreign powers, including the Hyksos, the Libyans, the Nubians, the Assyrians, the Achaemenid Persians, and the Macedonians under the command of Alexander the Great. The Greek Ptolemaic Kingdom, formed in the aftermath of Alexander's death, ruled Egypt until 30 BC, when, under Cleopatra, it fell to the Roman Empire and became a Roman province.[3]

The success of ancient Egyptian civilization came partly from its ability to adapt to the conditions of the Nile River valley for agriculture. The predictable flooding and controlled irrigation of the fertile valley produced surplus crops, which supported a more dense population, and social development and culture. With resources to spare, the administration sponsored mineral exploitation of the valley and surrounding desert regions, the early development of an independent writing system, the organization of collective construction and agricultural projects, trade with surrounding regions, and a military intended to assert Egyptian dominance. Motivating and organizing these activities was a bureaucracy of elite scribes, religious leaders, and administrators under the control of a pharaoh,

who ensured the cooperation and unity of the Egyptian people in the context of an elaborate system of religious beliefs.[4]

The many achievements of the ancient Egyptians include the quarrying, surveying and construction techniques that supported the building of monumental pyramids, temples, and obelisks; a system of mathematics, a practical and effective system of medicine, irrigation systems and agricultural production techniques, the first known planked boats,[5] Egyptian faience and glass technology, new forms of literature, and the earliest known peace treaty, made with the Hittites.[6] Ancient Egypt has left a lasting legacy. Its art and architecture were widely copied, and its antiquities carried off to far corners of the world. Its monumental ruins have inspired the imaginations of travelers and writers for centuries. A new-found respect for antiquities and excavations in the early modern period by Europeans and Egyptians led to the scientific investigation of Egyptian civilization and a greater appreciation of its cultural legacy.[7]

History

The Nile has been the lifeline of its region for much of human history.[8] The fertile floodplain of the Nile gave humans the opportunity to develop a settled agricultural economy and a more sophisticated, centralized society that became a cornerstone in the history of human civilization.[9] Nomadic modern human hunter-gatherers began living in the Nile valley through the end of the Middle Pleistocene some 120,000 years ago. By the late Paleolithic period, the arid climate of Northern Africa became increasingly hot and dry, forcing the populations of the area to concentrate along the river region.

In Predynastic and Early Dynastic times, the Egyptian climate was much less arid than it is today. Large regions of Egypt were covered in treed savanna and traversed by herds of grazing ungulates. Foliage and fauna were far more prolific in all environs and the Nile region supported large

populations of waterfowl. Hunting would have been common for Egyptians, and this is also the period when many animals were first domesticated.[10]

By about 5500 BC, small tribes living in the Nile valley had developed into a series of cultures demonstrating firm control of agriculture and animal husbandry, and identifiable by their pottery and personal items, such as combs, bracelets, and beads. The largest of these early cultures in upper (Southern) Egypt was the Badarian culture, which probably originated in the Western Desert; it was known for its high quality ceramics, stone tools, and its use of copper.[11]

Early tomb painting from Nekhen, c. 3500 BC, Naqada, possibly Gerzeh, culture

The Badari was followed by the Naqada culture: the Amratian (Naqada I), the Gerzeh (Naqada II), and Semainean (Naqada III).[12][page needed] These brought a number of technological improvements. As early as the Naqada I Period, predynastic Egyptians imported obsidian from Ethiopia, used to shape blades and other objects from flakes.[13] In Naqada II times, early evidence exists of contact with the Near East, particularly Canaan and the Byblos coast.[14] Over a period of about 1,000 years, the Naqada culture developed from a few small farming communities into a powerful civilization whose leaders were in complete control of the people and resources of the Nile valley.[15] Establishing a power center at Nekhen (in Greek, Hierakonpolis), and later at Abydos, Naqada III leaders expanded their control of Egypt northwards along the Nile.[16] They also traded with Nubia to the south, the oases of the western desert to the west, and the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East to the east, initiating a period of Egypt-Mesopotamia relations.[17][when?]

The Naqada culture manufactured a diverse selection of material goods, reflective of the increasing power and wealth of the elite, as well as societal personal-use items, which included combs, small

statuary, painted pottery, high quality decorative stone vases, cosmetic palettes, and jewelry made of gold, lapis, and ivory. They also developed a ceramic glaze known as faience, which was used well into the Roman Period to decorate cups, amulets, and figurines.[18] During the last predynastic phase, the Naqada culture began using written symbols that eventually were developed into a full system of hieroglyphs for writing the ancient Egyptian language.[19]