

Old Kingdom Egypt: 2686-2181 BCE

During the Old Kingdom period, Egypt was largely unified as a single state; it gained in complexity and expanded militarily. Old Kingdom rulers built the first pyramids, which were both tombs and monuments for the kings who had them built. Building monumental architecture—such as the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx in Giza, and temples for different gods—required a centralized government that could command vast resources.

The builders of the pyramids were not enslaved people but peasants, working on the pyramids during the farming off-season. These peasants worked alongside specialists like stone cutters, mathematicians, and priests. As a form of taxation, each household was required to provide a worker for these projects, although the wealthy could pay for a substitute. This demonstrates both the power of the state to force people to provide labor and also the advantages enjoyed by elites, who could buy their way out of providing labor.

Egyptians also began to build ships, constructed of wooden planks tied together with rope and stuffed with reeds, to trade goods such as ebony, incense, gold, copper, and Lebanese cedar—which was particularly important for construction projects—along maritime routes.

Middle Kingdom: 2000-1700 BCE

The Middle Kingdom saw Egypt unified again as kings found ways to take back power from regional governors. From the Middle Kingdom era forward, Egyptian kings often kept well-trained standing armies. The ability of the Egyptian state to create and maintain a standing military force and to build fortifications showed that it had regained control of substantial resources.

Political fragmentation led to the Second Intermediate Period. The precise dates are unclear; even though writing allowed for more events to be recorded, most things still were not, and many more records have been lost or destroyed.

Taking advantage of this political instability in Egypt, the Hyksos appeared around 1650 BCE. They were a Semitic people, meaning they spoke a language that originated in the Middle East, which indicated that they were not native to Egypt. The Hyksos imposed their own political rulers but also

brought many cultural and technological innovations, such as bronze working and pottery techniques, new breeds of animals and new crops, the horse and chariot, the composite bow, battle-axes, and fortification techniques for warfare.

New Kingdom: 1550-1077 BCE

Around 1550 BCE, the New Kingdom period of Egyptian history began with the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt and the restoration of centralized political control. This period was Egypt's most prosperous time and marked the peak of its power.

Also in this period, Hatshepsut, Egypt's most famous female ruler, established trade networks that helped build the wealth of Egypt and commissioned hundreds of construction projects and pieces of statuary, as well as an impressive mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri. She also ordered repairs to temples that had been neglected or damaged during the period of Hyksos rule.

The term pharaoh, which originally referred to the king's palace, became a form of address for the king himself during this period, further emphasizing the idea of divine kingship. Religiously, the pharaohs associated themselves with the god Amun-Ra, while still recognizing other deities.

In the mid-1300s BCE, one pharaoh attempted to alter this tradition when he chose to worship Aten exclusively and even changed his name to Akhenaten in honor of that god. Some scholars interpret this as the first instance of monotheism, or the belief in a single god. This change did not survive beyond Akhenaten's rule, however.

New Kingdom Egypt reached the height of its power under the pharaohs Seti I and Ramesses II, who fought to expand Egyptian power against the Libyans to the west and the Hittites to the north. The city of Kadesh on the border between the two empires was a source of conflict between the Egyptians and the Hittites, and they fought several battles over it, ultimately agreeing to the world's first known peace treaty.

Third Intermediate Period: 1069-664 BCE

The costs of war, increased droughts, famine, civil unrest, and official corruption ultimately

fragmented Egypt into a collection of locally-governed city-states. Taking advantage of this political division, a military force from the Nubian kingdom of Kush in the south conquered and united Lower Egypt, Upper Egypt, and Kush. The Kushites were then driven out of Egypt in 670 BCE by the Assyrians, who established a client state (a political entity that is self-governing but pays tribute to a more powerful state) in Egypt.

In 656 BCE, Egypt was again reunited and broke away from Assyrian control. The country experienced a period of peace and prosperity until 525 BCE, when the Persian king Cambyses defeated the Egyptian rulers and took the title of Pharaoh for himself, along with his title as king of Persia.