

Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-3a Government Under the Pharaohs

Book Title: World Civilizations

Printed By: Colin Morris-Moncada (006279659@coyote.csusb.edu)

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### 3-3a Government Under the Pharaohs

The pharaohs divided their kingdom into administrative districts, called [nomes \(\(NOH-mays\) Administrative districts in ancient Egypt.\)](#) (NOH-mays), and governed through a group of officials comprising mainly noble landowners and temple priests, who were responsible to the pharaoh but who were granted great local powers. In his human and divine aspects, the pharaoh was *directly* responsible for the welfare of Egypt. This meant that, as king, he had to provide effective administration to protect his subjects, maintain order, and even direct their productive efforts—for example, by seeing to it that the irrigation system was built and maintained and by informing the farmers of impending seasonal changes. As a divinity, he was the mystical embodiment of the land and the people. His good relations with the gods ensured prosperity and prevented natural catastrophes such as droughts, insect infestations, and epidemics. When a weak pharaoh came to the throne, the prestige of the central authority could—and occasionally did—break down, and everyone suffered.

There were two short intervals in Egypt's long history when the pharaoh's powers were seriously diminished: the so-called *Intermediate Periods* of 2200–2100 B.C.E. and 1650–1570 B.C.E. The causes of the first breakdown remain unclear, but it was partly a result of the pharaohs' loss of control over the governors of the southernmost nomes. The second of these periods is known to have been triggered by the invasion of the mysterious [Hyksos \(\(HICK-sohs\) A people who invaded the Nile Delta in Egypt and ruled it during the Second Intermediate Period \(c. 1650–1570 B.C.E.\).\)](#) (HICK-sohs) people, who crossed the Sinai Peninsula and conquered the Nile delta. In both cases a new native Egyptian dynasty appeared within a century and reestablished effective central government. The monarchy's grip on the loyalties of the people was sufficient so that it could restore the government in the same style, with the same values and officials as before.

What enabled the pharaoh to retain such near-magical power over his subjects for so long? For almost 2000 years, the belief in the divinity of the king (or queen—there were at least three female pharaohs) persisted, as did the conviction that Egypt was specially favored and protected by the gods, whose favor, Egyptians thought, was ensured by the pharaoh and his priests. However, this was equally the result of the happy situation that Egypt enjoyed through climate and geography. Nature provided, as nowhere else, a perpetual agricultural abundance, making Egypt the only place in the known world at that time to be able to export grain surpluses. Furthermore, for 3000 years of civilized life, until about 1000 B.C.E., Egypt was only rarely touched by war and foreign invasion. Until the Empire Period, no regular army—that great eater of taxes—was necessary.

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