

Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-4 Cultural Achievements
Book Title: World Civilizations
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3-4 Cultural Achievements

The wealth of the pharaoh and the willingness and skill of his people allowed them to erect the most stupendous monuments built by any people or government anywhere: the pyramids and temples of the Old Kingdom. Visitors have marveled at these stone wonders ever since. The Great Pyramid of Khufu (KOO-foo), located a few miles outside present-day Cairo, is easily the largest and grandest commemorative edifice ever built. The pyramids (built between 2600 and 2100 B.C.E.) were designed as tombs for the living pharaohs and were built while they were still alive. Much is still unknown about the pyramids' true purposes, but the perfection of their construction and the art within the burial chambers show Egyptian civilization at its most impressive.

The pyramids were not the only stone monuments erected along the Nile. Around 1300, several warrior-pharaohs celebrated the fame of their empire by erecting enormous statues of themselves and their favored gods—and even larger temples in which to put them. At the Nile sites of *Karnak* and *Tel el Amarna*, some of these still stand. Most losses of artistic and architectural wonders in Egypt have been caused not by time or erosion but by vandalism and organized burglary of tombs and treasure over many centuries. All but one of the pharaohs' tombs discovered to date have long since been robbed of the burial treasure interred with the mummies of the dead god-kings. The exception is that of the famous King [Tutankhamen \(\(too-TAHNK-ah-men\) A boy pharaoh who ruled Egypt, 1347–1339 B.C.E.\)](#) — King Tut—whose underground burial chamber was discovered in the early 1920s. Tutankhamen (too-TAHNK-ah-men; ruled 1347–1339 B.C.E.) died at the age of eighteen without having done anything of consequence during his short reign. The world would probably never have noted him had not the British archaeologist Howard Carter stumbled upon his grave 3000 years later.

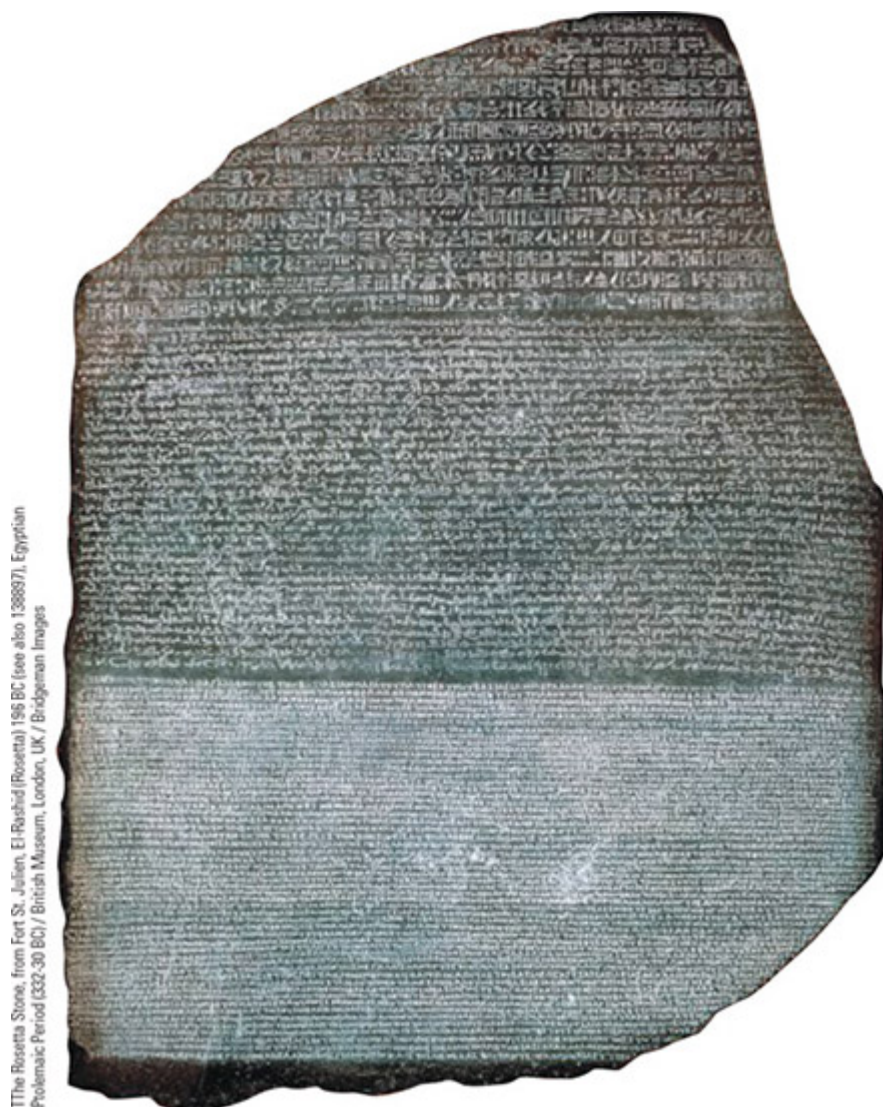
Egyptian monarchic statuary is distinguished by the peculiar combination of graceful and natural lines associated with great dignity and awesomeness. This awe is reinforced by the art and architecture that surround the great statues, which are designed to impress all onlookers with the permanence and power of the Egyptian monarchy. The Egyptians' mastery of stone is rivaled in Western civilization only by the artistry of the classical Greeks and Romans. And artists and architects who did not know the principle of the wheel and had only primitive tools and what we would consider very clumsy math and physics apparently created most of this art!

Egyptian writing developed differently from that of Mesopotamia. [Hieroglyphics \(\(high-roh-GLIH-fiks\) Egyptian pictographs, beginning as far back as 3000 B.C.E., that could convey either an idea or a phonetic sound.\)](#) (high-roh-GLIH-fiks; Greek for “sacred carvings”) were pictographs that could convey either an idea, such as “man,” or a phonetic sound, by

picturing an object that begins with a strong consonant sound. The word for owl, for example, began with the consonant *m* sound in spoken Egyptian, so a picture of an owl could be used to indicate that sound. This beginning of an alphabet was not fully developed, however. The use of hieroglyphics, which began as far back as 3000 B.C.E., was confined to a small group of educated people and gradually faded out after Egypt lost its independence in the sixth century B.C.E. The complete repertoire of 604 hieroglyphic symbols is now deciphered, enabling the reading of many thousands of ancient inscriptions.

Egyptian Hieroglyphics.

The Rosetta Stone was discovered by French scientists accompanying Napoleon's army during its occupation of Egypt in the 1790s. It contains three versions of the same priestly decree from the second century B.C.E.: in hieroglyphic Egyptian, demotic (cursive) Egyptian, and Greek. By comparing the three, the brilliant linguist Jean François Champollion was able (in 1822) to finally break the code of hieroglyphic symbols and commence the modern study of the Egyptian language.



TTThe Rosetta Stone, from Fort St. Julien, El-Rashid (Rosetta) 196 BC (see also 138897), Egyptian Ptolemaic Period (332-30 BC) / British Museum, London, UK / Bridgeman Images

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