

Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-3b The Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom

Book Title: World Civilizations

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3-3b The Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom

It has long been customary to divide Egypt's ancient history into *dynasties* (periods of monarchic rule by one family). In all, there were thirty-one dynasties, beginning with the legendary Menes and ending with the dynasty that fell to the Persian invaders in 525 B.C.E. The greatest were those of the pyramid-building epoch (3100–2200 B.C.E.) and those of the Empire (about 1550–1250 B.C.E.). The dynasties are traditionally grouped under three kingdoms: Old, Middle, and New.

Old Kingdom The [Old Kingdom \(The period of Egyptian history from 3100 to 2200 B.C.E.\)](#) (3100–2200 B.C.E.), which extended from Menes to the *First Intermediate Period*, was ancient Egypt's most fertile and stable period. During these nine hundred years, both form and content were perfected in most of those achievements that made Egypt remarkable: art and architecture, divine monarchy, religion, social and economic stability, and prosperity. The pharaohs of this epoch governed from Memphis and seem to have been unchallenged leaders who enjoyed the willing loyalty and labor of their people. This was the period that saw the construction of Egypt's greatest monuments to the pharaohs, the pyramids of Giza. Later cultural and intellectual developments were almost always only a slight variation or a deterioration of the pattern established during the Old Kingdom.

Middle Kingdom The [Middle Kingdom \(The period in Egyptian history from 2100 to 1650 B.C.E.; followed the First Intermediate Period.\)](#) (2100–1650 B.C.E.) followed the First Intermediate Period with five hundred years of political stability and the continued refinement of the arts and crafts. The country under the pharaoh's rule was extended farther up the Nile to the south. Trade with neighbors, including Mesopotamia, Phoenicia (Lebanon), Crete, and Nubia (see [Map 3.2](#)), became more extensive. The condition of the laboring poor in the hundreds of Nile-side villages seems to have gradually worsened, however. Religion became more democratic in its view of who could enter the afterlife, and a small middle class of officials and merchants began to appear.

Map 3.2

Ancient Egypt and the Nile

The first tourist to leave an account of Egypt was the Greek Herodotus in the fifth century B.C.E. He called Egypt “the gift of the Nile,” a phrase that still describes the relationship between the river and the people.

Thinking About This Map

Where did most of Egypt's village population live? Why was this so? Who do you suppose lived outside the Nile River Valley?



New Kingdom The **New Kingdom** (The period from c. 1550 to 770 B.C.E. in Egyptian history; followed the *Second Intermediate Period*. The period from 1550 to c. 1200 B.C.E. was the *Empire*.) (1550–770 B.C.E.) is also called the *Empire*, although the name really belongs only to its first three centuries (1550–1250). The New Kingdom began after the defeat of the Hyksos invaders in the 1500s (the *Second Intermediate Period*). It lasted through the years of imperial wars against the Hittites and others for control of Mesopotamia, which ended with Egyptian withdrawal. Then came long centuries of sporadic weakness and resurgence that ended with the Egyptian civilization's permanent conquest by foreigners.

The Empire was an ambitious experiment in which the Egyptians attempted to convert their eastern neighbors to their lifestyle and government theory. However, no one else was able to understand the Egyptian view of life or wanted it to be imposed on them. The Empire did not last because of both military reversals, starting around the time of Pharaoh **Akhnaton** ((ahk-NAH-tun) Name of a 14th-century B.C.E. Egyptian ruler who attempted to introduce monotheistic religious practice.) (akh-NAH-tun: 1300s B.C.E.), and internal discontent. By 1100, the pharaoh again ruled only the Nile Valley.

During their last three hundred years of independent existence, the Egyptians were frequently subjected to foreign invasion, both over the Sinai Desert and from the south, by way of the great river. Before the Persians arrived in 525, others such as the Kushites (KUHSH-ites) and the Assyrians had invaded repeatedly. But even after the Persian conquest, which marked the real end of ancient Egypt's existence as an independent state, the life of ordinary people in the fields and orchards saw no real change. Only the person to whom taxes and rents were paid was different. The cultural forms and beliefs of the inhabitants were by now so deeply rooted that no foreign overlord could alter them.

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