

# A HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

FOURTH EDITION

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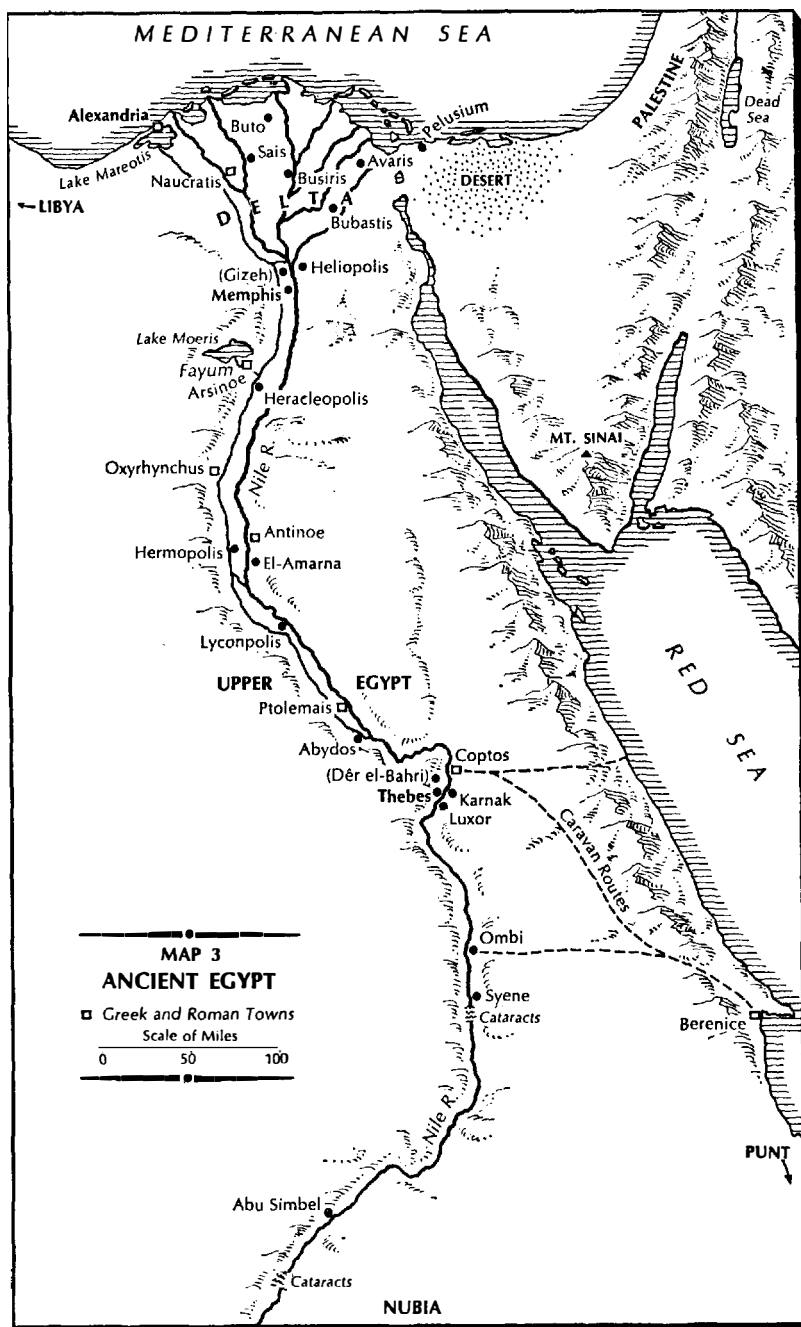
# 3

## EARLY EGYPT

In recent decades archeologists have generally agreed that lower Mesopotamia was the first area of the world to advance into civilization. The emergence of Egypt onto the same level, however, took place very little later and in its roots was probably an independent step.

It is fascinating and instructive to compare these neighboring civilizations. Both proceeded from roughly the same type of Neolithic base. In both the fundamental geographic factors were very similar. Although Egypt lies in Africa, it was connected far more to the Fertile Crescent than to its adjacent continent. As a result the civilized outlooks of early Mesopotamia and early Egypt shared major common characteristics, which continued to persist in later ages. Yet as we look at the main stages of Egyptian progress down to about 1700 B.C., we shall also find marked differences from Mesopotamia in many respects of political organization, religious views, and esthetic spirit. Some of these divergencies may be attributed to minor variations in geography and climate; but others cannot be so simply explained. Wherever men have risen to civilization, their outlook has taken on a distinctive flavor.

Since Egypt abuts on the Mediterranean Sea, its ancient wonders have always been known and marveled at by the other civilized societies which have fronted on this sea. From the days of Greece and Rome on down to modern times the civilization of the land of the Nile has exercised an influence directly upon western civilization; for most of us



the pyramids and pharaohs of Egypt seem more understandable than the *ziggurats* and *lugals* of Mesopotamia. Nonetheless this fact does not mean that later ages necessarily drew more on Egypt than on Mesopotamia. Each contributed much to the history of the ancient Near East and so to the subsequent civilized societies of Greece and Rome; but of the two the lasting influence of Mesopotamia was almost surely the greater.

#### EMERGENCE OF EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION

*Geographical Framework of the Nile Valley.* When the first great Greek historian Herodotus sailed down from his simple, poverty-stricken homeland to visit Egypt, he was fascinated by its pyramids and other great monuments and felt as much awe before its age-old civilization as did the later Greek philosopher, Plato. In Herodotus' geographical description of Egypt occurs a famous phrase, "the gift of the Nile," which well sums up the great geographical fact about Egypt.

The Nile river rises in the lakes of equatorial Africa and the highlands of Ethiopia and flows generally northward down a great earth-fault. Seven hundred and fifty miles from the sea it breaks over the last of six rocky ledges or cataracts; from that point the muddy, yellow stream slips slowly, without interruption, through a narrow valley almost 600 miles to the Delta, where it branches out in several mouths (see Map 3). The valley (called Upper Egypt) and the delta (Lower Egypt) have about 12,500 square miles of cultivable land which can be watered. The annual floods in later summer and fall (the occurrence of which baffled the Greeks) are far more useful than those in Mesopotamia; the Nile brings water but also leaches out the salt from the fields. A heavy population could be supported once men had learned to extend the watered area by short canals and basins. Rain falls only in the Delta, but even here is insignificant.

The Nile furnished not only water but also a fine artery of communication which encouraged an early and lasting political unification. Egypt was relatively isolated by the cataracts to the south and the Mediterranean to the north. On either side are deserts, which come down red and bleak to the very edge of the black, irrigated land; almost all the area which is marked Egypt on a map is completely uninhabitable. The cultivated strip throughout most of Egypt can be only 4 to 13 miles wide,

but in it the population tends to be virtually continuous. Accordingly men dwelt in villages rather than in cities of the Mesopotamian type; their mudbrick hovels were almost always located just off the cultivated fields so as not to lose any useful land.

While the lot of the Egyptian farmer was one of hard work, his life was considerably more secure than was that of a Mesopotamian peasant; and the Egyptian outlook had a tone of confidence and even enjoyment in life which was quite unknown in the land of Sumer and Akkad. Each day ancient Egyptians celebrated the rebirth of the sun in the east, God's land, and watched with sorrow its disappearance in the land of the dead to the west; each year came a great festival, the rebirth of life, as the Nile flooded and gave water and new fertility to their fields. Egypt knew three seasons: Inundation; Going Down of the Inundation, in which crops were planted; and Drought, in which the barley and wheat were harvested in March-April.

*Neolithic Development in Egypt* (5000-3100 B.C.). The population of ancient Egypt seems to have been a mixture of peoples who pressed in from Nubia to the south, Palestine and Syria to the north, and Libya to the west. Its language belonged basically to a linguistic group often called Hamitic, which was spoken along the north coast of Africa; but in Egyptian at least there were very strong Semitic affinities from earliest times. The first farming villages are peculiarly late, beginning in the fifth millennium along the Fayum lake and then by the edge of the upper Nile valley; closer to the river was a land of marshes and sand banks where papyrus reeds flourished and fierce animals like the crocodile and hippopotamus held sway. The steady process of desiccation along the north African coast made the highlands ever more arid even after historic times had begun and thus drove people toward the sure source of water represented by the Nile. Yet only after 4000 were the farmers confident enough of their techniques and social organization to start taming the fertile fields by the river.

Then came the same onrush which occurred in Mesopotamia. The swift rise of Egypt across the fourth millennium is marked by successive cultures which are called the Badarian, the Amratian, and especially the Gerzean. Systematic draining of swamps, the regular use of copper, the construction of boats from papyrus bundles, the very fine working of

even such hard stones as basalt and porphyry into vases — all betoken a great growth of skills and increase in population.

While most of this development stemmed from purely native roots, there is strong testimony that styles in pottery and tool-making were interconnected between Palestine and Egypt and that in the Gerzean period Semitic-speaking invaders from Asia entered the land. In the later stages of this era (c. 3250 B.C.) an even more intriguing event occurred, for a brief flurry of Mesopotamian influence, of Uruk type, made itself felt. Among the tokens of this influence are the presence of cylinder seals, construction in brick, and ships shaped in Mesopotamian form. The Egyptians may even have gained the idea of writing from the east, but the actual symbols they used were certainly of native origin. We cannot determine the route of contacts, though the spread of Uruk pottery through Syria suggests a Mediterranean route. On the even more critical problem, the extent to which the appearance of civilization in Egypt was stimulated by contact with another advanced area, our evidence thus far scarcely permits a dogmatic answer.

*Union of Egypt (about 3100 B.C.).* On the whole the men who dwelt by the Nile probably needed very little encouragement from the outside to break across the subtle barrier which separated civilization from their advanced Neolithic ways. Legends which survived into later times suggest that the valley and the Delta first came together into small principalities called nomes; in historic times there were 22 nomes in Upper Egypt and 20 in Lower Egypt. Then, apparently, the two areas united under separate kings. The last step, which came at the beginning of the civilized era, was the creation of a unified kingdom by Menes. This event is usually assigned to about 3100, though some scholars wish to lower it to about 2850.

The long centuries of Egyptian history that followed are conventionally divided into the Protodynastic stage, to 2700; the Old Kingdom, 2700–2200; the First Intermediate period, 2200–2052; the Middle Kingdom, 2052–1786; the Second Intermediate period, 1786–1575; the New Kingdom, 1575–1087; and the Post-Empire era (see Table 2 in Chapter 2). In Egyptian memory the history of the land was organized by dynasties of kings, which might or might not be related. These dynasties extended from Menes of the First Dynasty down to the Thirty-first Dynasty in 332, when Alexander the Great conquered the land.

## THE OLD KINGDOM

*Protodynastic Stage* (3100-2700 B.C.). In the Protodynastic era civilization became firmly established in Egypt as the political structure of the land was unified in the hands of the king. The population and physical resources at his disposal rose greatly as life became more secure; probably irrigation was also expanded widely. A well-defined, rounded outlook on life emerged with remarkable speed and stamped all aspects of culture, religion, and politics. The height of this unified system is called the Old Kingdom proper (Third through Sixth Dynasties).

To a modern observer the most appealing aspect of early Egyptian civilization is its art, and here we can sense most easily the particular qualities of the outlook shared by the inhabitants of the Nile valley. Further light can be gained from looking at Egyptian views on afterlife, the royal despotism, and the religious pattern.

*Arts of the Old Kingdom* (2700-2200 B.C.). A modern visitor to Egypt often feels that the most widely spread and the most satisfying form of early Egyptian art is its style of writing. Hieroglyphic script, as this style is called from Greek words meaning "sacred carving," covered the walls of tombs and temples alike in stately rows of stylized, repetitious symbols. From the artistic point of view these inscriptions are a truly elegant decoration, as well as serving as a means of conveying religious texts and praises of the rulers and their aides. Egyptian scribes used a complex combination of ideograms and phonetic signs (phonograms) with determinatives required to indicate to what class of objects a word belonged; even signs for single consonants appear. Frequently words were expressed both pictorially and phonetically, and the direction of writing varied according to the requirements of space and symmetry. Partly because the scribes along the Nile wrote on paper made from papyrus as well as carved on stone, their writing remained more pictorial than did cuneiform script, though a more cursive style (called hieratic) also developed. But the conservatism of ancient Egypt and the esthetic sense of its inhabitants combined to preserve the use of the formal hieroglyphic symbols in state documents.

The depth of artistic feeling in any civilization is reflected in the way its utilitarian objects are designed. The same spirit which one may find



in Egyptian writing is visible also in its furniture, vases, game-boards, jewelry, and a host of luxurious items buried in the tombs. These were made from the hardest of stone, from ivory, from glass, and from many other substances by patient workmen who knew a host of skillful techniques; the patterns are graceful, delicate, and also static over many centuries. Beside these minor arts, however, there occurs also developed work in painting, sculpture, and architecture.

The inscriptions which march across the limestone walls of Old Kingdom tombs often explain — or are in turn illuminated by — several rows of pictures in lightly raised relief, accentuated by color. The subjects of these scenes are often, especially in tombs, drawn from life. Peasants till the fields and harvest their ample crops; nobles hunt and fish; flocks of animals and vases loaded with food abound; feasts are depicted in graphic detail. To a modern spectator the fascinating panorama of activities and the artistic spirit of the pictures furnish a vivid introduction to Egyptian culture about 5000 years ago. Comical scenes, even jokes, appear. But the purpose of this work was a mixture of magic and religion; the pictures were to provide the dead with a view of human life and with earthly luxuries in the next world.

True sculpture appears in the statues of the dead. Since these figures were believed to contain some part of the soul of the departed and were so placed as to "receive" the food and drink offered to the dead, sculptors often worked in very hard, lasting types of stone as well as in more easily carved wood. The face of the subject was depicted in a realistic fashion, but the general intent was to incarnate the dead man in a static pose which would reflect a quality of eternal security. Some of the greatest Egyptian sculpture came very early, before society had set that pattern of rigid conventions which dominated all later Egyptian arts. The sculptors were, on the whole, far more interested in the physical world and in reality than Sumerian artists ever dreamed of being.<sup>1</sup>

The requirements of conventionality, however, limited their experiments. Even in the best work very primitive conceptual views still reflect

<sup>1</sup> The slate statue of Menkaure and his queen illustrated on Plate IV was found in the king's valley temple. Menkaure (Mycerinus in Greek tradition) built the last and smallest of the three great pyramids (Fourth Dynasty). This work, which lacks its final polishing, suggests the amazing achievements of the first Egyptian sculptors in its tranquil firmness; interesting, too, is the appearance of true affection.

the limited intellectual analysis possible in Egyptian civilization. Bodies are stiffly posed in standing or seated posture and have a cubical form. In reliefs the sense of composition is very limited; and here human bodies are normally contorted: the lower body is shown in side view, the torso is turned frontally, and the head is in profile. The imagination of Egyptian artists was of a very matter-of-fact type.

Our knowledge of the houses and palaces of the Old Kingdom is extremely limited, for they were built of mudbrick. The abodes of the dead are another matter, particularly after they came to be made of stone, and provide a wealth of information on architecture as well as other arts. In the Neolithic period the dead had been buried in holes lined with mats and were accompanied by their most valued possessions. Then came brick-lined burial chambers, crowned by *mastabas* or bench-like superstructures designed to protect the supplies for the dead ruler and to serve as a temple for his cult. From these, apparently, developed the more impressive works in stone, a substance reserved for tombs and temples. The preservation of the actual corpse was a serious matter for the king especially, and royal graves became amazingly complicated in the Old Kingdom. Already by the Third Dynasty the ruler Zoser (c. 2700) had his famous architect Imhotep build a step pyramid 204 feet high, made of small squared stones and located at the edge of the desert near the capital, Memphis. This great mound was accompanied by a majestic courtyard, which was adorned with engaged stone columns in the shape of reed bundles and also with subsidiary buildings, including a mortuary temple for the continuing worship of the dead ruler.

Within 75 years the kings of the Fourth Dynasty had progressed to the construction of the famous pyramids of Gizeh a few miles north of the step pyramid of Zoser; these were built of huge stone blocks encased by a smooth limestone exterior. The most mammoth of these monuments, the pyramid of Khufu (c. 2600), contained almost 6,000,000 tons of stone in a structure 481 feet high. The rock base of this pyramid did not vary in elevation more than half an inch; its orientation is almost precisely aligned with the points of the compass; the stones were very skillfully dressed for perfect fits. Construction of this pyramid with its valley chapel, causeway, and funerary temple proper—all forming a unified complex—must have taken thousands of men years of work with barges, sledges, levers, and rollers. By and large Egyptian architecture

always remained most impressive for its size; the qualities of architectural synthesis, finely detailed work, and even honest workmanship, as in making a solid foundation, are rarely present.

*The First Absolutism.* The pyramids reflect two important aspects of the Old Kingdom: the ability of its rulers to marshal the agricultural wealth of the land; and the development of very interesting religious concepts about afterlife. To take up first the political aspect of these conjoined forces, the king rose to become the overpowering focus of earthly life in reality as well as in the arts; as a later inscription put it, "The king of Upper and Lower Egypt is a god by whose dealings one lives, the father and mother of all men, alone by himself, without equal."<sup>2</sup> On an early macehead he is shown opening a canal; on the famous Narmer palette he is overwhelming in size as he strikes down his enemies; writing was largely used to celebrate his deeds. By the Fourth Dynasty inscriptions show in some detail the pattern of government, which has been well called undifferentiated royal absolutism. The king, that is, governed all aspects of life with the aid of a simple central administration, directed by a vizier and largely composed of his sons and other relatives. Below him, nomarchs moved from nome to nome to conduct the local administration.

The peasants were virtually serfs, registered in careful censuses and yielding their surplus in a variety of taxes and dues. Genesis 47:24 asserts that one-fifth of all the produce was owed to the government; this is probably not far from the mark. From the First Dynasty on, royal expeditions worked the turquoise and copper mines of Sinai, a main source of Egyptian metals. Other expeditions, especially in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, explored up the river to Nubia and along the Red Sea to Somaliland, seeking ivory, incenses, rare animals, and dwarfs; northeastward the Egyptians made their way by sea to Phoenicia for the cedars of Lebanon. Slaves were very uncommon at this time; but the free artisans worked almost solely for the king and greater nobles.

The monarch, who dwelt in a Per-ao (Pharaoh in Hebrew) or Great House, lived and died in great pomp and luxury. About his tomb stretched hundreds and thousands of graves of his attendants and officials, some of whom were slain in the First Dynasty to accompany their master; over 10,000 stone vases were found in the step pyramid of Zoser.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by E. O. James, *The Ancient Gods* (New York: Putnam, 1960), p. 108.

But the ruler also had great responsibilities, which explains the willingness of his people to heap up the pyramids. He was a god on earth, who assured the rise of the Nile, the prosperity of the land, and its peace and order. The pharaoh's will was thought to become reality as soon as he had spoken. Partly for this reason Egypt never developed the written law codes of Mesopotamia; but the royal fiat was one which incarnated *ma'at* or justice. To unify itself, in sum, early Egypt took the intellectually simple approach of raising its ruler to the position of a superhuman symbol incarnated in human form. The pharaoh of the Old Kingdom was a lonely creature elevated on a great pedestal and enveloped in a maze of ceremony; about this figure revolved much of the development of religion and mythology.

*Egyptian Religion.* The religion of Egypt remained always a medley of so many concepts, which themselves changed over the centuries, that it is not easily defined. Each nome had a sacred totem, often in the form of an animal, and in times of unrest the nomes fought each other as bitterly in the name of these patron deities as did the Sumerian city-states. Higher yet stood a range of greater gods, who were conceived in animal as well as human shapes. The visible world had been created out of a watery waste by divine forces, who had also brought the gods into existence; and the gods governed all aspects of human life no less than did the similar deities of Mesopotamia. One of these great gods was Ptah of Memphis, whose priests fashioned a story that he had created the world. The sky was worshiped as Horus, who was a soaring falcon at times, and in yet different concepts was the son of Osiris; yet the sky could also be visualized mythologically as a cow, an ocean, a woman, and in other ways. The sun-disk came to be known principally as Re, apparently a Semitic importation whose cult centered at Heliopolis near the modern Cairo; Re became steadily more powerful from the Fourth Dynasty onward, as a combination of the forces of nature. But a host of other deities populated the Egyptian mind.

Within the common polytheistic framework there were marked differences between Egypt and Mesopotamia. The gods who watched over the land of the Nile were visualized in a far more cheerful light, partly perhaps because men worked directly for the king rather than for the gods. Their natures were less distinct and flowed into each other. Above all, the kings of the Old Kingdom held a firm control over the

religious system, the priests of which were essentially his deputies for the detailed conduct of sacrifices and other ceremonies. Pharaoh was a god on earth and was related to many of the other gods. His royal title bore a "Horus name," he was visualized very literally as the son of Re, he incarnated Ptah, and on death he came to be unified with Osiris. His unfettered strength was reflected in his identification now with the wild bull, now with the swift hunting falcon. Only in the period of the New Kingdom were the priests to assert their independence, and the strength of Egypt irretrievably waned when eventually they became virtual masters of the land themselves.

Another fascinating difference between Egyptian and Mesopotamian religious views lay in the relative concepts of afterlife. In Mesopotamia, men served the gods in this life but, once dead, had only a shadowy existence. The Egyptian, on the other hand, had a very complex concept of the human soul. Accordingly he buried his dead carefully along the edge of the western desert and gradually developed detailed, graphic views of afterlife revolving about the *akh*, that part of a man which became an "excellent spirit"; the *ka*, to which funerary offerings were made; and the *ba*, a manifestation of the soul which could enter or leave the dead body. Such an emphasis does not mean that the inhabitants of the Nile valley were morbid, though religious fears did exist and became more pronounced by the time of the New Kingdom; the upper classes at least enjoyed life so much that they wished to cling to its delights, even after death. The inscriptions and pictures on the walls and the rich physical equipment buried in their tombs were designed in large part to achieve this aim.

At the beginning of history the god who conducted the dead to the world of afterlife was Anubis, who was visualized as a jackal-headed god. During the Old Kingdom the cult of Osiris rose greatly. Osiris was a legendary king, who seems to have been an embodiment of the forces of agriculture; as often happened elsewhere in the ancient Near East the fertility cults connected with farming led men on to interlinked concepts of afterlife for themselves. In the early form of his myth, Osiris was killed by his wicked brother Seth — who at times symbolized the desert — and his corpse was thrown in the Nile. His wife Isis rescued and temporarily resuscitated him so that he might sire a child by her; this was Horus, who eventually secured a trial of Seth and became king in

Egypt. Osiris passed to the underworld where he was ruler and admitted the dead to his realm after testing their conduct during life on earth; in the New Kingdom he is depicted at times as weighing the soul of a dead man against a feather to see if it were light enough of earthly misdeeds.

In addition to ritual celebrations every year of the deeds of Osiris an enormous mass of burial practices and religious customs grew up to protect the dead on their trip to the next world. While the nobles who were buried about the pyramids of the Old Kingdom rulers might thus hope to secure afterlife, only the king himself at that time could become unified with Osiris. To secure this end the Pyramid Texts of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties gave extensive magical spells and advice on entry into the world to come.

*Literature and the Sciences.* To round out a picture of Egyptian civilization in the Old Kingdom one must place beside its artistic, political, and religious aspects the literary and scientific attainments of the age. In these latter fields, however, Egyptian progress was very limited.

The arts, as we have seen, were stimulated by the rise of royal absolutism and the evolution of views on afterlife and were to have considerable effects across the ancient Near East in the second and first millennia B.C. These motive forces played much less directly on other fields. Having evolved the figure of the pharaoh, the practical Egyptians did not feel so keenly as did the Sumerians the need to brood on the nature of the gods and the meaning of life or to fashion heroes as mediators between the divine and human planes. The tragic figure of Gilgamesh could never have arisen in the land of the Nile, which did not create any significant myths or epics to illuminate the place of man. Beyond magical incantations and praises of the ruler, which were only semihistorical, Egyptian literature consisted of travelers' tales, little stories, and manuals of advice on getting ahead in the world. Egyptian sciences, too, remained on a practical, comparatively low level. To Egypt we owe a solar calendar of 365 days, which perhaps crystallized about the beginning of the Old Kingdom proper; to 12 months of 30 days each were added 5 days at the end of each year, and the day was divided into 24 hours — the further subdivision of an hour into 60 minutes came in Greek times on the basis of Mesopotamian sexagesimal reckoning. Some very early papyri show considerable skill in surgery (as well as containing magical spells to cure the ill). In mathematics and other areas, on the other hand, Mesopota-

mia was far more advanced; and such a practical invention as wheeled vehicles was not used in Egypt until the New Kingdom.

#### THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

*End of the Old Kingdom (about 2200 B.C.).* As the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh reflects some of the basic views of that land, so the vast pyramids of Gizeh are a symbol of the Old Kingdom in Egypt. In their stark outline and great bulk they suggest the simplicity, the concentration, and the earthly riches of the civilized society that erected them. The directors of Egypt had a naive confidence in human powers which also shines through the reliefs and statues of the era; the height of the Old Kingdom was an optimistic age in which men were enthusiastic about sheer materialistic achievements. Yet the pyramids can also justly be called "acts of faith," for they arose in an effort to safeguard the body of the dead pharaoh, who was thought to watch over the safety of his people so long as his body survived and his spirit was nourished by sacrifices at his mortuary temple. And finally, in the facts that even such masses of stone could not protect the dead rulers from grave-robbers and that the pyramids after that of Khufu dwindled rapidly in size, one can sense the incipient decline of the Old Kingdom.

By the Fifth Dynasty this decline was well under way. Strife broke out in the royal family; the nomarchs tended to become hereditary local lords; tribes trickled into Egypt from Palestine and Syria. The consumption of Egypt's resources in mortuary endowments for the dead rulers became heavy; and the peasants who tilled the lands along the Nile seem to have grown weary of their burdens.

Thus came the end of the Old Kingdom, toward 2200 B.C. To illuminate the troubled two centuries that followed, the First Intermediate Period, there are several papyri which reflect the pessimism produced when a rather materialistic outlook could no longer count on prosperity. Equally interesting are the portrayals of the lawlessness and usurpations of property rights. Even in men's views of afterlife a disregard for the old restrictions spread widely, for the nobles at least — and perhaps others — now claimed for themselves that right of unification with Osiris after death which previously had been reserved for the king.

*The Middle Kingdom.* The local rule of nomarchs lasted only until shortly before 2000 B.C. Then the kings of the Eleventh Dynasty, who ruled from Thebes, far inland in Upper Egypt, once more pulled together the valley and the delta into one state. Under their successors, the Twelfth Dynasty, the Middle Kingdom of Egyptian history (2052–1786 B.C.) reached its height.

In the most general terms Egyptian civilization continued along the lines already well set, for Egypt always retained its initial patterns far more than Mesopotamia could. Yet the ways of the Middle Kingdom were noticeably different from those of the Old Kingdom artistically, politically, and religiously.

Since the arts and crafts depended heavily on royal patronage, which secured the necessary raw materials and supported the artisans by commissioning their products, there was a natural reinvigoration of artistic output as political unity reappeared. The scale, however, of building was smaller; the cautious rulers of this age erected no pyramids to advertise their graves. Sculpture, painted reliefs, and the household luxuries produced by the minor arts have survived in considerable volume. In this work the naive yet powerful inventiveness which had resulted in the masterpieces of the Old Kingdom now yielded to a more sophisticated complexity.

Politically the pharaohs of the Twelfth Dynasty were once again the focus of the land, and their military power is a more obvious phenomenon than in earlier centuries. External trade was resumed under their protection and became more extensive than it had been earlier. At times rulers of Egypt seem to have held parts of the Syrian coast, like the port of Byblos; the mines of Sinai were exploited intensively. Egyptian objects even turn up on the island of Crete, and Egyptian models helped to spark the remarkable surge of civilization on that island which is called Minoan (see below, Chapter 5). Nonetheless the pharaohs were not entirely masters at home as the rulers of the Fourth Dynasty had been. Both in this world and in the next the nobles held a relatively independent place. They continued to dominate the local countrysides and buried their dead in provincial centers, rather than about the graves of the kings. To secure afterlife they appropriated royal symbols of the earlier age and invoked magical spells from the Pyramid Texts to persuade Osiris that they were “justified” for entry into his realm. These literary



and artistic elaborations are called the Coffin Texts and were the source of the Book of the Dead in the New Kingdom.

Whereas the kings of the Old Kingdom had relied largely upon their own relatives for advice and aid in running Egypt, the governmental bureaucracy of the Middle Kingdom seems to have been open with relative ease to anyone who had learned the difficult art of the scribe. One ruler, while advising his son to "respect the nobles and make thy people to prosper," also laid down the dictum, "do not distinguish the son of man of birth from a poor man."<sup>3</sup> Further, and grimmer, advice comes in the apocryphal advice of king Amen-em-het I, just after 2000, to his son, "hold thyself apart from those subordinate to thee . . . Even when thou sleepest, guard thy heart thyself," for this essay on practical government goes on to recount the assassination of the king by his own courtiers.<sup>4</sup>

*Ethical Interests.* The political and religious temper of the Middle Kingdom has ethical notes which must interest any student of Egyptian development. Throughout their history the Egyptians conceived the cosmic order as one of justice (*ma'at*), and the gods generally favored the right. Yet the earthly guardians of this justice, the pharaohs, were now depicted in sculpture and described in literature in a manner which markedly differed from that of the Old Kingdom. While the statues of the kings were still awe-inspiring figures tinged with superhuman majesty, their portrait heads at times were lined with care, a testimony to their concern to secure justice and good government for their subjects. Literature, now far more mature in style, contains a number of folk tales which emphasized this side of royal rule. One such tale, the story of the Eloquent Peasant, recounts how a peasant was mistreated by a bureaucrat but insistently and successfully sought redress for his wrongs. In the first essay of royal advice quoted in the previous paragraph occurs the impressive statement, "more acceptable is the character of one upright of heart than the ox of the evildoer." Similar ethical notes may be found in the boast of a king's steward that he fed the poor, protected the widows and orphans, refrained from maligning others for his own profit, and refused bribes in the conduct of justice.

<sup>3</sup> Instruction for King Meri-ka-re, tr. John A. Wilson, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 415.

<sup>4</sup> Instruction of King Amen-em-het, *ibid.* p. 418.

Whereas the outlook of the Old Kingdom had been one of pride in its achievements, the unrest that terminated that era seems to have administered a rude shock to Egyptian society. For at least a moment the inhabitants of the Nile valley were driven, like their brothers in third-millennium Mesopotamia, to reflect upon some of the problems inherent in the rise to civilization. This reflection was not as continuous as that which later produced the Hebrew views of divine justice or the Greek philosophical outlook; Egyptian thought was too practical and on too simple a plane. Again, in Egypt the problems were conceived in earthly fashion, for life in Egypt was directly administered by the god-king and his aides. Deep class divisions, which were prominent in Mesopotamia, accordingly were less pressing problems in Egypt.

And so the ethical tinge to views of life which we find in the Middle Kingdom represents scarcely more than a temporary flash of illumination. A truly conscious crystallization of ethical requirements for civilized life and their union with religious views was not to be easily attained, and was not reached in Egypt; nor did the men of the Middle Kingdom come to conceive the next world in nonmaterial terms. In their tombs there is, if anything, an even greater emphasis than previously upon providing a host of material supplies for the hereafter. The museums of the modern world contain from these tombs hosts of models, as of gardens, breweries, boats, concubines, servants (called *ushabti* or "answer" figurines), which were intended to serve the rich men buried therewith or to take their places in working for the gods.

*Decline of the Middle Kingdom.* As the Middle Kingdom proceeded, the forces of local independence rose once more. General unrest again brought a disruption of political unity by the eighteenth century B.C. and even a foreign rule, at least of the Delta. After the Second Intermediate Period (1786-1575) Egypt was to be drawn far more directly into the main course of ancient Near Eastern history; but this, like events in Babylonia after Hammurabi, must be reserved for the next chapter.

#### THE FIRST CIVILIZED SOCIETIES

*Qualities of Near Eastern Civilization.* Even brief surveys of the developments in Mesopotamia and Egypt down to 1700 B.C. will provide the thoughtful student of history with ample food for reflection. In the

entire sweep of ancient history, the appearance of agriculture in the Neolithic era and the rise of civilization just before 3000 B.C. are the two most revolutionary steps in man's progress, if one measures events solely in terms of the physical basis of life. To consider only the latter step, the appearance of civilization was marked by a tremendous explosion of population in the river valleys, where settlement became denser than had ever before been possible in human history. Buildings, both secular and religious, were erected on a mammoth scale; industrial and agricultural techniques were much refined; the leaders, at least, in this new world lived and died in pomp and luxury hitherto unknown.

If the historian is to measure correctly the meaning of the rise of civilization, he must not fix his eyes solely upon this material progress. The qualities of civilization, as the term was defined at the beginning of Chapter 2 are basically intellectual and social. A civilized structure of life requires much of mankind in mutual adaptation and acceptance of a necessary interdependence. Nor was all achieved, once the Sumerians and Egyptians had risen to this level. We have already surveyed some 1500 years of the historic period in Egypt and Mesopotamia and have seen that society in both areas found itself confronted by great problems inherent in the new intellectual and social patterns. Spiritually, intellectually, and politically remarkable changes were to occur in the subsequent spread and intensification of civilized systems.

In comparison with these later developments, the ways of life in early Egypt and Mesopotamia have certain obvious characteristics. One of the most evident is their strongly religious flavor. Religion, indeed, has always been a prominent force in human culture, for here mankind explains to itself the meaning of existence and visualizes the unseen powers which at once limit and impel men's actions. But in the early Near East all aspects of life were conjoined under the guidance of religion to a degree which rarely recurred thereafter in ancient times. The gods were simply conceived as forces directing nature; their ethical qualities were not quite, but almost, incidental; and the physical needs of an agricultural population were evident in the prominent place of fertility cults. Magic and ritual observance of ceremonies bulked large both in daily life and in the activities of the states.

In the realm of knowledge the practical, conventional cast of thought at this time is also apparent. Scientific interests were directed largely

toward the end of classifying and naming objects. Between the artists and the visible world stood a host of almost unchanging conventions, often ironclad, as well as the requirements laid down by priestly and royal patrons. Literary thought was often cast in the form of myth. Fields of knowledge were not yet specialized and distinct, nor were they explored by tools of abstract thought. Behind all these qualities stands the fact that the earliest civilized men had as yet only begun that long process of conscious self-analysis which still occupies thinkers today. In rising to the level of civilization men had necessarily grouped themselves in tight social and political units under gods and pharaohs, and the conventions and social stratification which early resulted from that grouping were not easily to be modified or enlarged.

If we thus note the limitations and primitive characteristics of early civilization in the Near East this must not lead one to underestimate its remarkable achievements. Beside such imperialists as Sargon I stood reformers like Urukagina. Most of the artists turned out conventional work; but those who designed the pyramids and carved the statue of Menkaure and his queen were true masters, sure in touch and esthetically creative. In applied metallurgy, agricultural techniques, astronomy, mathematics, and many other fields firm bases had been created for later advances. So too the social, political, and economic structure of life had become far more complex and differentiated and stood as a foundation for later evolution and expansion.

*Differences between Egypt and Mesopotamia.* The interlocked set of qualities which we sum up in the term "civilization" appeared first in the cities of lower Mesopotamia. Throughout history the rise and fall of civilization has been closely connected with the waxing and waning of cities; the word itself is derived from the Latin term for city-state (*civitas*). Although the basic natural resources upon which the cities build have usually been the product of the countryside, the conscious, ordered qualities of this advanced form of life are very directly linked to the social and political characteristics of urban organization.

Yet the historian must always guard against simple generalizations; for the history of Egypt serves as a partial exception to the equation which has just been made. By the end of the Middle Kingdom even Thebes was no more than an administrative capital. The differences between Egypt and Mesopotamia were deep in other respects. The land

of the Nile commonly accepted political unity rather than division into small, particularistic units. Its inhabitants appear to have had a more cheerful outlook and to have brooded less darkly (and penetratingly) about the place of man before the gods. While weaker in the sciences, Egypt nourished an art which was far more diverse than that of Sumer and much more appealing to later ages.

Each civilization which has appeared in the history of the world must fascinate the historian as a manifestation of mankind's varied capabilities, and each has contributed material to the general outlook of those which have come afterward. There is no need to draw up a detailed list of the wide debts which subsequent civilizations owe to Sumerians and Egyptians, for after all the very concept of civilization itself was first born in the Near East. Inevitably, as a result, the "first" in many fields of learning, technology, political organization, and so on must be located here, and more particularly in Mesopotamia than in Egypt. Not until we come to the Greeks will we find a people who influenced the course of civilization in so many respects as did the "black-headed people" of Sumer. Although life in Mesopotamia was not so sure and relatively tranquil as that in the Old Kingdom of Egypt, its influences were perhaps the more significant as a result.

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Some evidence on Egyptian history has always been available in the writings of Greek and later authors, especially the histories of Herodotus and Diodorus and some Hebrew records. A native priest, Manetho, set down about 280 B.C. an account in Greek which was in part a useful

survey of ancient traditions; this in turn was used by Jewish and Christian writers to help in determining Hebrew chronology. Serious modern interest in the physical remains of Egyptian culture began with the French expedition to Egypt under Napoleon (1798–1801); the famous Rosetta stone was found at this time and was captured by the English when the French army surrendered. Archeologists have labored fruitfully in Egyptian sands for over a century. Among the greatest in the field have been the American James Henry Breasted (1865–1935), who founded the Oriental Institute, and the Englishman Sir W. M. Flinders Petrie (1853–1942), who helped to make archeology a more scientific discipline.

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