

## **Egyptian Dynasties**

[Menes](#) (or Narmer) unified Upper and Lower Egypt and established his capital at Memphis around 3000 B.C.. By the time of the Old Kingdom, the land had been consolidated under the central power of a king, who was also the "owner" of all Egypt. Considered to be divine, he stood above the priests and was the only individual who had direct contact with the gods. The economy was a royal monopoly and so there was no word in Egyptian for "trader." Under the king was a carefully graded hierarchy of officials, ranging from the governors of provinces down through local mayors and tax collectors. The entire system was supported by the work of slaves, peasants and artisans.

The Old Kingdom reached its highest stage of development in the Fourth Dynasty. The most tangible symbols of this period of greatness are the three enormous pyramids built as the tombs of kings at Giza between 2600 and 2500. The largest, [Khufu](#) (called Cheops by the Greeks), was originally 481 feet high and 756 feet long on each side. Khufu was made up of 2.3 million stone blocks averaging 2.5 tons each. In the 5th century B.C. the Greek historian [Herodotus](#) tells us that the pyramid took 100,000 men and twenty years to build. The pyramids are remarkable not only for their technical engineering expertise, but also for what they tell us about royal power at the time. They are evidence that Egyptian kings had enormous wealth as well as the power to concentrate so much energy on a personal project.

The priests, an important body within the ruling caste, were a social force working to modify the king's supremacy. Yielding to the demands of the priests of Re, a sun god, kings began to call themselves "sons of Re," adding his name as a suffix to their own. Re was also worshipped in temples that were sometimes larger than the pyramids of later kings.

In the Old Kingdom, royal power was absolute. The pharaoh (the term originally meant "great house" or "palace"), governed his kingdom through his family and appointed officials. The lives of the peasants and artisans was carefully regulated: their movement was limited and they were taxed heavily. Luxury accompanied the pharaoh in life and in death and he was raised to an exalted level by his people. The Egyptians worked for the pharaoh and obeyed him because he was a living god on whom the entire fabric of social life depended. No codes of law were needed since the pharaoh was the direct source of all law.

In such a world, government was merely one aspect of religion and religion dominated Egyptian life. The [gods of Egypt](#) came in many forms: animals, humans and natural forces. Over time, Re, the sun god, came to assume a dominant place in Egyptian religion.

The Egyptians had a very clear idea of the afterlife. They took great care to bury their dead according to convention and supplied the grave with things that the departed would need for a pleasant life after death. The pharaoh and some nobles had their bodies preserved in a process of [mummification](#). Their tombs were decorated with paintings, food was provided at burial and after. Some tombs even included full sized sailing

vessels for the voyage to heaven and beyond. At first, only pharaohs were thought to achieve eternal life, however, nobles were eventually included, and finally all Egyptians could hope for immortality.

The Egyptians also developed a system of writing. Although the idea may have come from Mesopotamia, the script was independent of the cuneiform. Egyptian writing began as pictographic and was later combined with sound signs to produce a difficult and complicated script that the Greeks called hieroglyphics ("sacred carvings"). Though much of what we have today is preserved on wall paintings and carvings, most of Egyptian writing was done with pen and ink on fine paper (papyrus). In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt as part of his Grand Empire. He brought with a Commission of Science and Arts composed of more than one hundred scientists, engineers and mathematicians. In 1799 the Commission discovered a basalt fragment on the west bank of the Nile at Rachid. The fragment is now known by its English name, the [Rosetta Stone](#). The Egyptian hieroglyphics found on the Rosetta Stone were eventually deciphered in 1822 by [Jean François Champollion](#) (1790-1832), a French scholar who had mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Ethiopic, Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and Coptic. The Rosetta Stone contains three inscriptions. The uppermost is written in hieroglyphics; the second in what is now called demotic, the common script of ancient Egypt; and the third in Greek. Champollion guessed that the three inscriptions contained the same text and so he spent the next fourteen years (1808-1822) working from the Greek to the demotic and finally to the hieroglyphics until he had deciphered the whole text. The Rosetta Stone is now on display at the [British Museum](#) in London.

During the period of the Middle Kingdom (2050-1800 B.C.) the power of the pharaohs of the Old Kingdom waned as priests and nobles gained more independence and influence. The governors of the regions of Egypt (*nomes*) gained hereditary claim to their offices and subsequently their families acquired large estates. About 2200 B.C. the Old Kingdom collapsed and gave way to the decentralization of the First Intermediate Period (2200-2050 B.C.). Finally, the *nomarchs* of Thebes in Upper Egypt gained control of the country and established the Middle Kingdom.

The rulers of the Twelfth Dynasty restored the power of the pharaoh over the whole of Egypt although they could not control the *nomarchs*. They brought order and peace to Egypt and encouraged trade northward toward Palestine and south toward Ethiopia. They moved the capital back to Memphis and gave great prominence to Amon, a god connected with the city of Thebes. He became identified with Re, emerging as Amon-Re.

The Middle Kingdom disintegrated in the Thirteenth Dynasty with the resurgence of the power of the *nomarchs*. Around 1700 B.C. Egypt suffered an invasion by the Hyksos who came from the east (perhaps Palestine or Syria) and conquered the Nile Delta. In 1575 B.C., a Thebian dynasty drove out the Hyksos and reunited the kingdom. In reaction to the humiliation of the Second Intermediate Period, the pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty, most notably Thutmose III (1490-1436 B.C.), created an absolute government based on a powerful army and an Egyptian empire extending far beyond the Nile Valley.

One of the results of these imperialistic ventures of the pharaohs was the growth in power of the priests of Amon and the threat it posed to the pharaoh. When young Amenhotep IV (1367-1350 B.C.) came to the throne he was apparently determined to resist the priesthood of Amon. Supported by his family he ultimately made a clean break with the worship of Amon-Re. He moved his capital from Thebes (the center of Amon worship) to a city three hundred miles to the north at a place now called [El Amarna](#). Its god was Aton, the physical disk of the sun, and the new city was called Akhenaton. The pharaoh changed his name to [Akhenaton](#) ("it pleases Aton"). The new god was different from any that had come before him, for he was believed to be universal, not merely Egyptian.

The universal claims for Aton led to religious intolerance of the worshippers of other gods. Their temples were closed and the name of Amon-Re was removed from all monuments. The old priests were deprived of their posts and privileges. The new religion was more remote than the old. Only the pharaoh and his family worshipped Aton directly and the people worshipped the pharaoh. Akhenaton's interest in religious reform proved disastrous in the long run. The Asian possessions fell away and the economy crumbled as a result. When the pharaoh died, a strong reaction swept away his life's work.

His chosen successor was put aside and replaced by [Tutankhamon](#) (1347-1339 B.C.), the husband of one of the daughters of Akhenaton and his wife, Nefertiti. The new pharaoh restored the old religion and wiped out as much as he could of the memory of the worship of Aton. He restored Amon to the center of the Egyptian pantheon, abandoned El Amarna, and returned the capital to Thebes. His magnificent tomb remained intact until its discovery in 1922.

The end of the El Amarna age restored power to the priests of Amon and to the military officers. Horemhab, a general, restored order and recovered much of the lost empire. He referred to Akhenaton as "the criminal of Akheton" and erased his name from the records. Akhenaton's city and memory disappeared for over 3000 years to be rediscovered by accident about a century ago.