

1. The Beginning of Civilization: 5500 BCE

Did you know that civilization began in a place called the Fertile Crescent? The Fertile Crescent includes the land in modern-day Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and northern Egypt.

Before 10,000 BCE, humans living in the area known as the Fertile Crescent were hunters and gatherers. Around 9000 BCE, people in the region began to cultivate the land by growing crops and farming them. By the year 5500 BCE, more complex irrigation systems allowed people to focus on more than just farming, like building cities. In Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt, important civilizations emerged, including the Phoenicians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Sumerians, and the Egyptians.

These civilizations made crucial advances in technology, art, education, and politics. They invented the wheel, written script, the concept of time, the domestication of animals, and more!

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2. Who were the Egyptians?

The Ancient Egyptians belonged to a rich and complex society. They are now celebrated for their accomplishments in art, architecture, religion, mythology, science, and medicine, among other things. The history of the Egyptian civilization began around 3500 BCE, when people began to build cities and communities around the Nile River. They quickly became one of the most powerful societies in the world. Ancient Egypt lasted for nearly 3,000 years.

The Egyptians left behind many well-preserved artifacts, pieces of art, and writing. Much of what we know about this ancient culture comes from their pyramids and burial sites. We also have learned about the Egyptians through their mythology and religious beliefs. They were very spiritual and felt very connected to nature, their homeland, and the Nile River.

Many of our modern practices come from the Egyptians, such as the theater, engineering techniques, ship building, irrigation systems, surgery, fashion, and paper.

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3. Upper and Lower Egypt: The Predynastic Period

The Predynastic Period lasted for nearly 2,000 years, during which Egypt was divided into two communities, Upper and Lower Egypt. Scholars use the term “Predynastic” to refer to the centuries in which people had settled in Egypt, but it was not yet a unified kingdom. During this time, Egyptians lived in villages and cities along the Nile River, where they farmed the land. While many disagree on the beginning of the Predynastic Period, historians all agree that it ended in 3100 BCE, when the North and South were unified under King Menes.

Contrary to what you might think, Upper Egypt was actually to south, and Lower Egypt was in the north! This was because the Nile River flows from south to north. The names were based on the direction of the current. For many years, these two communities traded with each other but remained separate.

4. Early Dynastic Period (2950-2686 BC)

The Early Dynastic Period is considered the official beginning of Ancient Egypt as a kingdom. Around 3100 BCE, a king from the city of Thinis in Upper Egypt, conquered Lower Egypt. Many scholars believe that King Menes was actually named King Narmer, or that King Menes was simply a combination of all of the military leaders and rulers who helped unify Upper and Lower Egypt.

King Narmer/Menes's son, Hor-Aha, was the first king to construct a "mastaba tomb," or a house for the dead. He was very religious and believed the mastaba tomb would protect him in the Afterlife. Then, around 2670 BCE, King Djoser of the Third Dynasty ordered the construction of the first "stacked mastaba." We know them today as "pyramids". Djoser's pyramid was located at Saqqara. It was designed by an architectural genius named Imhotep and was meant to honor deceased kings.

During the Early Dynastic Period, Egyptians developed the calendar, a written language, constructed impressive monuments, and improved their agricultural methods. Egyptians also strengthened their religious values, and religion became very important in the centuries to come.

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5. The First Script: Hieroglyphics

The Egyptians were among the first civilizations to develop a system of writing. The first known examples of the Egyptian alphabet dates back to the Early Dynastic period. We now refer to this script as "hieroglyphics."

The hieroglyphic alphabet consisted of small pictures that represented sounds or consonants. These pictures were often images of animals in nature, crops, household items, and shapes. Hieroglyphics were considered the "words of God," and they were used mostly by priests. In everyday life, Egyptians wrote in a quicker, less artistic script to conduct business and record history.

Until 1799, no one knew how to translate hieroglyphics, so much of what Ancient Egyptians had written down was lost knowledge. In 1799, archaeologists discovered the Rosetta Stone. A linguist named Jean-Francois Champollion decoded the cipher by comparing it to the **which script??** on the other side of the stone. From that point forward, the world was able to unlock the long hidden secrets of this amazing civilization.

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6. Old Kingdom

In 2613 BCE, King Sneferu took the throne and established the Fourth Dynasty. This date is recognized as the beginning of the Old Kingdom. The Old Kingdom is also referred to the "Age of the Pyramids" by many historians. This is because Sneferu and his sons oversaw the construction of perfectly triangular pyramids throughout their reign, including the Great Pyramids of Giza.

King Sneferu also belonged to the cult of the Sun God, Ra. At the time, kings were thought to be gods themselves. A few generations later, another king named Djedefre called himself the "Son of Ra," which meant that he did not believe that he was a full god himself.

By the time the 6th Dynasty took power, the Old Kingdom had begun to collapse. Priests had more power while the king had less. The central government in Memphis was no longer as strong as it once was. Then, an immense drought caused mass famine, and unified Egypt began to suffer. At the end of the Old Kingdom, power in Ancient Egypt was more evenly divided among individual cities.

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7. The Pyramids of Giza

Although he tried several times to perfect the pyramid, Sneferu's builders did not really succeed until their third attempt. This pyramid, which is known as the Red Pyramid, was triangular, immense, and had flat sides. Still, the pyramid that has been the most admired throughout history was the pyramid of Giza. Khufu, Sneferu's son ordered the structure to be built when he became king around 2589 BCE. It took nearly 23 years to build, and over 2,300,000 blocks of stone. When it was finally finished, it was the largest and most geometrically perfect pyramid yet.

Today, the Great Pyramids of Giza are the only site out of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World that still remains standing. Before the construction of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Great Pyramid of Giza was the tallest building made by human hands on earth.

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8. First Intermediate Period

After the great famine at the end of the 6th Dynasty, Ancient Egypt was very unstable. In addition to the damage caused by the drought and famine, the political structure of the kingdom had changed. After King Sneferu and his son, Khufu, had constructed their pyramids, they ordered high priests to take care of them. This gave more power to the priests, and eventually weakened the power of the central government in Memphis.

As a result, the Old Kingdom collapsed. For the next 150 years, cities and municipalities in Ancient Egypt became more independent. There was no king to order the construction of great monuments, and far fewer records were made of the events that occurred during this time. Eventually, the civilization split into Upper and Lower Egypt again, with rulers making decisions from Herakleopolis and Thebes.

Around 2125 BCE, a wealthy leader from Thebes named Intef began the process of unifying the country. He was later praised for his efforts and the reunification was a success.

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9. Middle Kingdom (1975-1640 BCE)

Once the 11th Dynasty came to an end, so did the First Intermediate Period. The rise of King Amenemhet I to the throne marked the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. He established a new capital at It-towy, and Upper and Lower both fell under his rule. Thebes was still an important religious center, but it was no longer the center of just one half of the Egyptian government.

During the Middle Kingdom, many of the traditions that were developed during the centuries of the Old Kingdom were transformed. While scholars are able to identify these transformations today, they cannot necessarily explain why they took place. There are very few texts or artifacts left behind that give reason to this shift. However, historians believe that the king was no longer all-powerful, and in fact high ranking political officials made the decisions. Still, large statues were constructed in honor of these pharaohs, as well as pyramids, monuments, and impressive structures made of limestone and brick.

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10. New Kingdom: The Rulers

After the Middle Kingdom, Egypt went through nearly 200 year-period of unrest known as the “Second Intermediate Period.” Then, around 1567 BCE, King Ahmose I reunited Egypt once again. He was the first pharaoh in the 18th dynasty. Some of the pharaohs and queens that proceeded him include Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, and Ramses II and III. These are some of the most well-remembered leaders in Egyptian and world history. They led Ancient Egypt to the height of their power and wealth during the centuries of the New Kingdom. The empire stretched from Nubia in the south all the way to the Euphrates in the north.

During this time period, pharaohs ordered the construction of the Valley of the Kings. It was located in the hills of Thebes and used as a burial site for the leaders of the 18th, 19th, and 20th dynasties. For nearly 500 years, pharaohs’ tombs were placed there with hoards of wealth, preserved food, and mummified slaves for the afterlife. They were protected by the strongest and most attentive guards, but still, many grave robbers were able to break into the tombs and steal jewels, gold, spices, and more.

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11. The New Kingdom: The Legacy

The New Kingdom is regarded as a period of great social and religious change. Around 1350 BCE, one pharaoh in particular, Amenhotep IV, changed his name to “Akhenaten” in honor of the god Aton. His wife, Nefertiti, also worshipped this singular god. Many citizens of Egyptian rejected this change. When Akhenaten’s son, Tutankhamun, took the throne, he did not carry on this tradition.

The last successful pharaohs of the New Kingdom were Ramses (or Ramesses) II and III. They were honored widely for their great leadership, as they expanded the kingdom and ordered new temples, monuments, and cities to be constructed. One of the most famous battles occurred under Ramesses II. During the Battle of Kadesh, Ramesses II led the Egyptian armies against the Hittites and won. He was then buried in one of the largest known complexes in the Valley of the Kings. According to the Bible, Ramses II was also on the throne when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt.

Ancient Egypt reached its golden age during the New Kingdom, and even began trading and interacting with Classical Empires in the West. Word of their power spread across the world, and much of what we know about their culture comes from this time.

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12. Hatshepsut: The First Female Pharaoh

Did you know that Ancient Egypt had several female rulers? One of them was Hatshepsut, who is recognized as having been one of the greatest leaders ever to take the throne in Ancient Egypt. She was the daughter of Thutmose I, and she ruled from 1479-1458 BCE.

For many years, Hatshepsut acted as the wife and queen to Thutmose II. When he died, however, she claimed that the god, Osiris, had chosen her as the next pharaoh. She was supported by the high priests, and she took the throne. Her first act was to send Egyptian merchants into the legendary land of Punt. They set off to find wealth in a territory Egyptians hadn't entered for 500 years. When they got back, they brought gold, ivory, jewels, and animals like apes, panthers, and giraffes with them. Hatshepsut's people praised her for the mission's success.

Hatshepsut was the first woman to radically change Egyptian power structures. She then led for 21 years and brought peace and harmony to the land.

13. Third Intermediate Period (1075-715 BCE)

The Third Intermediate Period was a time of unrest and chaos in Ancient Egypt. After the death of King Ramses XI around 1075 BCE, the central government in Thebes fell apart again. The high priests of Amun were extremely powerful, and the role of the pharaoh had become less important.

Other cities became autonomous over their citizens as well, like Tanis, Thebes, Memphis, Sais, Hermopolis, and Herakleopolis. Furthermore, foreign rulers in Libya and Nubia took control of their regions. They established their own dynasties, like that of Kush in Nubia, and became very powerful. Nubia later took Egypt over and ruled the entire empire throughout the 24th and 25th dynasties.

Then, in 671-666 BCE, the Assyrians attacked and invaded the Egyptian empire. The Nubians were not strong enough to drive them out, and they established control in the north. The Persians also invaded and dominated parts of the kingdom during the Third Intermediate Period. In 525 BCE, they took over Lower Egypt and remained in control until 404 BCE, when Amyrtaeus took Egypt back and united the kingdom again.

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14. Late Period (525-332 BCE)

Many consider the Late Period to be the official decline of the Egyptian Empire. In 525 BC, the Persian empire, led by Cambyses II, attacked Egypt. They conquered the empire and established their authority over the people. However, many Persian kings "ruled from a distance," meaning they let Egyptian leaders remain in command but claimed the empire as Persian territory.

Throughout the Late Period, many upper-class Egyptians led revolts. Historical writings show that they wanted to preserve their culture and remain independent. Most Persian leaders, meanwhile, were tolerant and respectful of the Egyptian culture. They let Egyptian pharaohs undertake impressive building projects, such as the Temple of Isis. Darius I the Great even ordered builders to repair monuments damaged in their battles.

The short-lived 30th dynasty was the last time native Egyptians ruled over their country. Nectanebo I and his son, Nectanebo II were strong pharaohs and were praised for keeping Egyptian culture, art, and architecture thriving under their rule.

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15. Alexander the Great Invades Egypt (332 BCE)

Throughout much of the Late Period, the Persians were focused on their ongoing war with the Greeks in Europe. At the time, there was a trading center named Naucratis in Egypt. Many Greeks lived there and were accustomed to trading directly with Egyptians. When the Persians took over the empire, the Greeks encouraged the Egyptians to revolt. They wanted to defeat their long-term enemy and squash their power.

Then, around 359 BCE, King Philip II of Macedonia conquered many city-states in Greece. Macedonia was a growing power, and they turned toward Egypt next. When he died suddenly, his son, Alexander, took over his father's mission. Today, we know him as Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great invaded Egypt and defeated the Persians in 331 BCE. He founded the city of Alexandria, and then he was declared a god. He led Macedonia until 323 BCE, and left Egypt in the charge of his general, Ptolemy I Soter. This man went on to establish the Ptolemaic Dynasty.

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16. Queen Cleopatra and the Battle of Actium (31 BCE)

Have you ever heard of Cleopatra? She is one of the most famous rulers in all of history. You might have read about her in Shakespeare's play, or any of the several Hollywood films made about her life.

In reality, Cleopatra was a Macedonian ruler and the last of the Ptolemaic Dynasty in Egypt. She ruled in from 51 to 31 BCE. Around 48 BCE, she began planning to overthrow her brother.

Around this time, Julius Caesar, the famed emperor in Rome, had come to Egypt to defeat his own enemy. When he met Cleopatra, he fell in love with her. He helped her defeat her brother and restored her to the throne. She later followed him back to Rome, but after his assassination, fled to her homeland.

In 41 BCE, Cleopatra met the new Roman emperor, Marc Antony. They too fell in love. They were together for nearly 10 years and had three children. However, Marc Antony had several enemies. In 31 BCE, his rival, Octavius, finally defeated him. Antony and Cleopatra both ultimately took their own lives, and Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire.

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17. The End of the Ancient Egyptians

After Egypt became a province of Rome, the empire was no longer an independent power force. They provided grain and trade ports to the Romans and continued to inhabit the land. Still, Egyptians continued

to worship their gods, record histories in hieroglyphics, and erect monuments and statues as they always had.

Then, around the 4th century CE, Christianity began to take control. The Roman Empire had already converted to Christianity under Constantine, and native Egyptians could not resist the spread of the religion. Many pagan temples and sanctuaries were closed. Romans began to convert hieroglyphics into a version of Greek script.

For two more centuries, the ancient Egyptian language survived. Until 640 CE, Egyptians still spoke in the same tongue as the original pharaohs had nearly 4,000 years before. Then, in 640, the Arabs took over Egypt. The language was displaced by Arabic speakers, and all but died out. This shift marked the final end of the great Ancient Egyptian civilization.

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18. Howard Carter and Tutankhamun's Tomb

For many centuries, the world knew very little about the Ancient Egyptians. By 7th century, not even their language had survived. No one could translate hieroglyphics and many of the burial sites and important monuments had been covered up or destroyed by time and dust.

The discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 changed everything, however. After it was successfully translated, historians and archaeologists were able to access thousands of years of Ancient Egyptian records.

Then, in 1922, a British archaeologist named Howard Carter led an expedition to the Valley of the Kings. They had been searching for the tomb of King Tutankhamun for six full years. When they finally found the entryway, they discovered his mummified body and several rooms filled with riches. This discovery helped Egyptologists learn a great deal more about the ancient empire.

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19. The Role of the Pharaoh

The king, or pharaoh, in Ancient Egypt was an incredibly important figure for both religious and political matters. They were considered divine, either as gods themselves or as the children of gods. This belief allowed them to communicate between the cult gods and the people in Egyptian society. It also imbued the pharaoh with almost limitless power. However, their main duty was to maintain harmony, or *ma'at*, among their people. This included waging war on neighboring kingdoms if it was necessary to protect Egypt or find resources for survival.

Pharaohs lived in great palaces, which included several buildings to house their entourage as well. They had several wives and many children. When they died, pharaohs were buried in luxurious tombs, either in pyramids or the Valley of the Kings.

There are many famous Egyptian Pharaohs who set examples for leaders in the centuries after Ancient Egypt fell. Among them were Narmer, Djoser, Khufu, Hetshepsut, Thutmose III, Amenhotep, Akhanaten, Tutankhamen, Ramses I, II, III, listed in order of the era when they ruled.

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20. Mummification and Preserving the Dead

Around the Early Dynastic Period, Egyptians began burying their dead in “mastaba tombs.” These were believed to be eternal resting places for the human body. Meanwhile, the soul, or “ka,” went on to the afterlife, but only if the body remained in good shape on Earth.

To achieve this, Egyptians invented the practice of mummification. Using chemicals, salts, spices, and incense, they removed all of the body’s internal organs and cleaned and stuffed it with palm wine, myrrh, and cassia. They removed the brain from one’s skull through the nose using a metal hook. After this, they soaked the body in a protective chemical for 70 days and wrapped it in linen. Egyptians even mummified their pets! Once mummified, the deceased’s family took the body and buried it in a tomb, along with food, wine, weapons, jewelry, and animals for the afterlife. However, only families who could pay for the embalming process got their relatives mummified. Otherwise, people were buried in the desert.

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21. Egyptian Religion and Mythology

In Ancient Egypt, religion was related to every sphere of life. Whether it was politics or trade, the Egyptians consulted the gods and followed their oracles. They worshipped many different gods, who often took human or animal form, or some combination of the two. Some of their primary gods were Ra, the Sun God, Osiris, the God of the Dead, and his sister, Isis.

Egyptians believed that the soul had nine parts, including the “ka.” This was the essence that would live on forever. Preserving the body was highly important, because if the body was not properly preserved, one’s soul would not live in eternal peace. This belief came from the myth of Osiris, the Egyptian’s principle god. He had been unfairly murdered and then resurrected, and his son, Horus, had returned Egypt to peace and harmony.

Ancient Egyptians also used the Book of the Dead to guide their funeral rites. This book was filled with paintings and descriptions of the gods and the afterlife, and how to send the pharaohs and other important people to the afterlife.

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22. Children in Ancient Egypt

Children in Ancient Egypt lived well and were taken care of by their parents. Although they were expected to help around the house, they were also given time to play outside or with toys. Many of their games included “strengthening exercises,” which helped children grow to be able-bodied adults. These included “water-jousting” on the Nile River, as well as swimming, sailing, and rowing. They also played with marbles, tops, balls, and wooden figurines.

Until the age of 12 or 13, children were also raised to take over their parents' livelihood. They might have been taught to become merchants, craftsmen, farmers, and homemakers. The wealthiest Egyptian children were educated by slaves. They learned subjects like math, reading and writing, history, science, and engineering.

Children were also expected to learn the legends and stories of the gods. They went with their parents to worship and took part in rituals.

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23. Daily Life and Social Classes in Ancient Egypt

Like many other ancient civilizations, society was made up of slaves, the lower class, aristocrats, and royalty. Slaves were at the bottom of the totem pole, and many died while constructing the pyramids and temples. Artisans, traders, farmers, and builders belonged to the lower or middle class. They lived in mud houses. The thickness of the walls of their houses depended on their wealth. Some middle class families could pay for funeral rites and the embalming process, while others could not. Members of the military were more highly regarded. Scribes and physicians came next, just below aristocrats and the pharaoh.

In Ancient Egypt, women were considered equal to men. As the civilization valued harmony and balance above all else, women had more freedom and were encouraged to seek happiness. If they could pay for education, they could even be scribes, doctors, priests, or leaders.

All Egyptians enjoyed watching and playing sports and games. They went to wrestling matches, played a board game called Senet, went to festivals, read, and explored nature. In general, they believed it was important to be happy, and sought contentment in their daily lives.

24. Egyptian Inventions and Technology

The Ancient Egyptians were a highly innovative and skilled society. They created many important engineering tools and building methods that we still use today. The ramp and lever, as well as the development of the wheel are two such methods. It is amazing to imagine that they built the pyramids without any modern technology. These structures are geometrically perfect as well as enormous, and therefore very impressive.

Egyptians also invented many modern household items that are still found currently. Toothpaste, toothpicks, toothbrushes, perfume, hairbrushes, and wigs were all everyday items found in Egyptian homes. They also invented paper by using the reeds from the Nile River to create papyrus.

Modern medicine also owes many of its practices to the Egyptians. The tools, chemicals, and powders they used in the embalming process showed a deep knowledge of the human body. They were an incredibly sophisticated and creative society.

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