Ancient Egypt: Achievements

For Grades 6-8

This Pack contains:

7 ARTICLES
3 IMAGES
3 VIDEOS

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

ARTICLE

ancient Egypt

No other country—not even China or India—has such a long unbroken history as Egypt. Some 5,000 years ago, the Egyptians had already reached a high stage of civilization. They lived under an orderly government. They carried on commerce in ships, and they built great stone structures. They established the first calendar known to use a year of 365 days, approximately equal to the solar year. Most important of all, they had acquired the art of writing.



A wall painting from ancient Egypt shows a boat on the Nile River.

© G. Dagli Orti—DeA Picture Library/age fotostock

Because they lived so long ago, the Egyptian people had to find out for themselves how to do many things that are easily done today. They adopted some inventions of the Sumerians but made more extensive use of them. In Egypt’s Nile valley the early development of the arts and crafts that formed the foundation of Western civilization can be traced. (*See also* Babylonia and Assyria.)



The mummy and mummy case of an Egyptian princess date to the 21st dynasty, from 1075 to about 950 BC. They are now in the collection of the British Museum, in London, England.

© The Print Collector/Alamy



Two of ancient Egypt's greatest achievements were hieroglyphic writing and the pyramids.

Contunico © ZDF Studios GmbH, Mainz; Thumbnail © Mikhail Kokhanchikov/Dreamstime.com

The traveler along the Nile River sees many majestic monuments that reveal the achievements of ancient Egypt. Most of these monuments are tombs and temples. The ancient Egyptians were very religious. They believed in a life after death—at first only for kings and nobles—if the body could be preserved. So they carefully embalmed the body and walled it up in a massive tomb. On the walls of the tomb they carved pictures and inscriptions, and they decorated some private tombs with paintings. They put into the tomb the person’s statue and any objects they thought would be needed when the soul returned to the body. The hot sand and dry air of Egypt preserved many of these objects through the centuries, and thousands of these artifacts are now in museums all over the world. Together with written documents, they show how people lived in ancient Egypt.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The desert sands have also preserved the remains of prehistoric people. By their sides, in the burial pits, lie stone tools and weapons, carved figures, and decorated pottery. These artifacts help archaeologists and historians piece together the story of life in the Nile River valley centuries before the beginning of the historical period.

Prehistoric Period

In prehistoric times the land of Egypt was different from what it is today. There was abundant rain but no river delta, because the sea extended far up the Nile valley. The plateau on each side of the water was grassland, which the people would wander over in search of game and fresh pastures. They had no permanent home. They hunted with crude stone hand axes and with bows and arrows. The arrows were made of chipped flint.

Gradually the rains decreased, and the grasslands dried up. The Nile began to deposit silt in the valley and to build up the delta. The animals went down to the valley, and the hunters followed them and settled at the edge of the jungle that lined the river.

In the Nile valley the people’s way of life underwent a great change. They settled down in more or less permanent homes and progressed from food gathering to food producing. They still hunted the elephant and hippopotamus and wild fowl, and they fished in the river. More and more, however, they relied for meat on the animals they bred—long-horned cattle, sheep, goats, and geese.



A flint sickle blade was made during the prehistoric period of ancient Egypt, about 6900–3100 BC. The flint blade would have been attached to a straight wooden holder and used to grind grain.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of The British School of Archaeology, 1926 (26.253.35), www. metmuseum.org

The early Egyptians learned that the vegetables and wild grain they gathered grew from seeds. When the Nile floodwater drained away, they dug up the ground with a wooden hoe, scattered seeds over the wet soil, and waited for the harvest. They cut the grain with a sharp-toothed flint sickle set in a straight wooden holder and

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

then ground it between two flat millstones. The people raised emmer (wheat), barley, a few vegetables, and flax. From the grain they made bread and beer, and they spun and wove the flax for linen garments.



A jar from the late Naqādah II era is decorated with paintings of people aboard a boat and animals, c. 3500–c. 3300 BCE; in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 30 x 31 cm.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1920 (20.2.10), www. metmuseum.org

The first houses were round or oval, built over a hole in the ground. The walls were lumps of mud, and the roofs were matting. Later houses were rectangular, made of shaped bricks, with wooden frames for doors and windows—much like the houses the Egyptian farmers live in today. To work the lumber, the ancient Egyptians used ground stone axheads and flint saws. Beautiful clay pottery was created, without the use of a pottery wheel, to hold food and drink. They fashioned ornaments of ivory, made beads and baskets, and carved in stone the figures of people and animals. They built ships that had oars, and they carried on trade with nearby countries. Instead of names, the ships had simple signs, probably indicating the home port. These signs were an early step in the invention of writing.

Good farmland was scarce. The desert came down close to the marshes that edged the river. To gain more land, the people rooted out the jungle, filled in marshes, and built mud walls to keep out floodwater. In time they engaged in large-scale irrigation work, digging canals that cut across miles of land. This labor required the cooperation of many people living in different places. Leaders became necessary to plan the work and direct the workers. Because of this need, orderly government arose.

Population and wealth grew with the increase in farmland. There was food enough to support a professional class, who worked at crafts instead of farming. Villages grew into towns, and then large towns spread their rule over nearby villages and became states.

At the end of the prehistoric period, there were only two political units—Lower Egypt (the delta, in the north) and Upper Egypt (the valley, in the south). Later, when Egypt was united, the people still called it the Two Lands. The king of all Egypt wore a double crown combining the white crown of the south with the red crown of the north.

Before the prehistoric period ended, the Egyptians were stimulated by their contact with people who lived in a Mesopotamian river valley in Asia. These people were more advanced than the Egyptians in working metal, and

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

they also had writing. Although this was probably the inspiration for Egyptian writing, the Egyptians did not take over the Mesopotamian script but developed a script of their own. This great invention brought Egypt abruptly to the threshold of history, for history begins with written records.

Dynasties of Egypt



Historians divide ancient Egypt into three periods: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. These are times when Egyptian civilization flourished. They are separated and followed by periods of decline.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski



Several pyramids and other buildings from ancient Egypt have survived to the present day. Many are located along the course of the Nile River.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The beginnings of writing in Egypt go back to about 2925 BC, when the Two Lands became united in a single kingdom. According to tradition, it was Menes, a king of Upper Egypt, who brought about the union. He stands first in the long line of kings who ruled Egypt for about 3,000 years. Egyptian priests made lists of their kings, or pharaohs, and noted the most important events of their reigns. About 280 BC one of these priests, Manetho, grouped the pharaohs into 30 dynasties. (A dynasty is a succession of rulers of the same line of descent.)

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Modern historians group the dynasties into periods. The periods when Egyptian civilization flourished are the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. The Old Kingdom lasted from about 2575 to about 2130 BC. The Middle Kingdom began in 1938 BC and continued until about 1630 BC. The New Kingdom lasted from about 1539 to 1075 BC. These three great periods in ancient Egyptian history are separated by periods of decline. They are called the First Intermediate period (about 2130–1938 BC), the Second Intermediate period (about 1630–1540 BC), and the Third Intermediate period (1075–656 BC). The final dynastic period—also a time of decline—is called the Late period (664–332 BC).

The Old Kingdom

Little is known of Menes's successors until the reign of King Djoser, or Zoser. He was active at the end of the 3rd dynasty, in the middle of the third millennium BC. Djoser's capital was located at Memphis, on the Nile's west bank near the point where the Two Lands met. Imhotep, a master builder, erected Djoser's tomb, the step pyramid of Saqqarah, on high ground overlooking the city. This monument—the first great building in the country made entirely of stone—marked the beginning of Egypt's most creative period, the Pyramid Age.



The Pyramids of Giza are located on the west bank of the Nile River near Giza, south of Cairo, in northern Egypt.

© Ron Gatepain



The Great Sphinx at Giza, 4th dynasty

E. Streichan/Shostal Associates

The Old Kingdom period begins with the reign of Snefru. He was the first Egyptian king to build pyramids with flat, rather than stepped, sides. Later kings also built their tombs in true pyramidal form. Each pyramid guarded the body of one king, housed in a chamber deep within the pile. The climax of pyramid building was reached in

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

the three gigantic tombs erected for Kings Khufu (Cheops), Khafre, and Menkaure, which are now collectively called the Pyramids of Giza. Near them in the sand lies the Great Sphinx, a colossal limestone statue featuring the body of a lion and the head of a human.

The Old Kingdom lasted about 450 years. It was an active, optimistic age, an age of peace and splendor. Art reached a brilliant flowering, with sculpture achieving a grandeur never later attained. The pharaoh kept a splendid court. The people worshipped him as a god on Earth, for they believed him to be the son of Re, the great sun god. They called him *pr-ʿo* (in the Bible, pharaoh), meaning “great house.”

About 2130 BC the Old Kingdom came to an end. Nobles became independent and ruled as if they were kings, and the country was split up into small warring states. Irrigation systems fell into disrepair. According to writers of the time: “The desert is spread throughout the land. The robbers are now in the possession of riches. Men sit in the bushes until the benighted traveler comes to . . . steal what is upon him.” Thieves broke into the pyramids and robbed them of their treasures.

The Middle Kingdom

The Middle Kingdom period began in 1938 BC. After a long struggle, the rulers of Thebes won out over their enemies and once again united Egypt into a single state. Thebes was then a little town on the Nile in Upper Egypt. In the New Kingdom it became one of the ancient world’s greatest capitals.

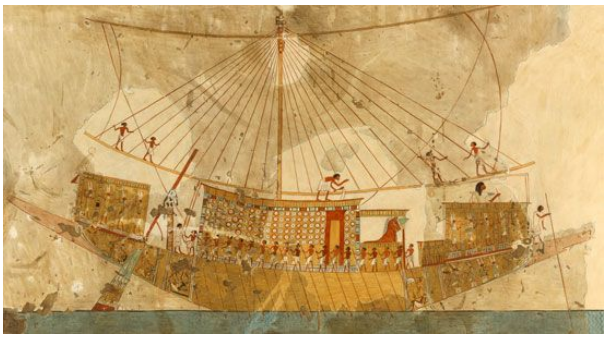


Decorated pillars grace a hall in the Great Temple of Amon at Karnak, Egypt. Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom began construction of the temple complex.

KuLouKu—iStock/Thinkstock

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom began construction of one of the most colossal temples of all time, the Great Temple of Amon at Karnak. They also built enormous irrigation works in Al-Fayyum. Noting the annual heights of the Nile flood at Aswan, they laid plans to use the Nile water wisely.



Ancient Egyptians sail a boat, in a painted copy of a tomb painting at Thebes, Egypt, from the 1300s BC.

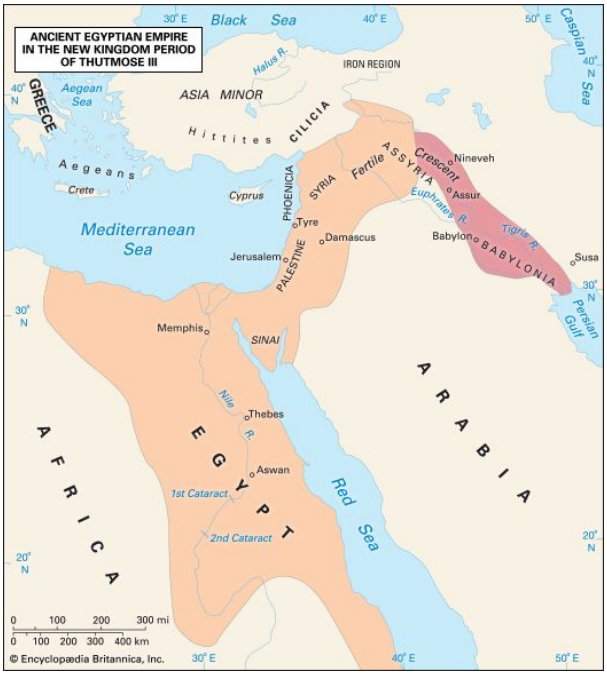
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.4.19), www. metmuseum.org

The pharaohs sent trading ships up the Nile to Nubia and across the sea to Mediterranean lands. The Egyptians got copper and turquoise from the mines in Sinai. From Nubia they imported gold and hard and semiprecious stones as well as items that came through Nubia from farther south in Africa. These included ivory, ebony, incense, animal skins, ostrich feathers, and live animals. Egyptians also obtained slaves from Nubia. In exchange, the Egyptians traded manufactured luxury goods and foods, probably including grains, honey, wine, and beer.

After more than two centuries of peace and prosperity, Egypt entered another dark age. It fell for the first time to foreign rulers. The Hyksos came from Southwest Asia and settled in northern Egypt beginning about the 18th century BC. In time they rose to power. They used new technologies including horses and chariots in combat. They had superior bows and improved metal weapons. The Egyptians, fighting on foot, were no match for them. The Hyksos occupied Lower Egypt (the north) and, beginning about 1630 BC, ruled there for about a century. They failed to conquer Upper Egypt, however. From the Hyksos, the Egyptians learned new methods of warfare. Eventually, King Kamose, an Egyptian who ruled over southern Egypt, began a successful war of liberation.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The New Kingdom



During the New Kingdom period Egypt became a Mediterranean empire. Around 1479 BC Thutmose III, riding “in a chariot of fine gold,” led his armies out of Egypt into Phoenicia, Palestine, and Syria. In later campaigns he extended the empire to the Euphrates Valley in Mesopotamia. Earlier rulers had already pushed the frontiers south into Nubia, beyond the First Cataract of the Nile.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The Egyptians expelled the Hyksos in the 16th century BC. A new era then dawned for Egypt. This period, the New Kingdom, was the age of empire. The once-peaceful Egyptians, having learned new techniques of warfare, embarked on foreign conquest on a large scale. The empire reached its peak under Thutmose III, one of the first great generals in history. He reigned from 1479 to 1426 BC, in the 18th dynasty. Thutmose III fought many campaigns in Asia and extended Egypt’s rule to the Euphrates River.

Slaves and tribute poured into Egypt from the conquered nations. The tribute was paid in goods, for the ancient world still did not have money. Wall paintings show people from Nubia, Babylonia, Syria, and Palestine bearing presents on their backs and bowing humbly before the pharaoh.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



Hatshepsut was one of only a few women to rule ancient Egypt. At a certain point in her reign, she was portrayed as a male in formal portraits. She was represented with a male body and false beard.

© ang17a/Fotolia

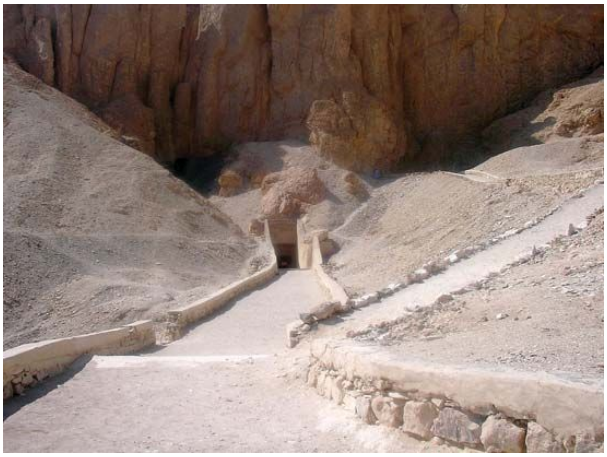
The Egyptian rulers used their new wealth and slaves to repair the old temples and to build new ones. Hatshepsut, Egypt's first great female leader, coruled with Thutmose III from about 1473 to 1458 BC. She enlarged the Great Temple of Amon at Karnak. She also built her own beautiful temple at Dayr al-Bahri.



Amenhotep III had the Colossi of Memnon carved from single blocks of stone to stand outside his mortuary temple entrance in Thebes, Egypt.

© Patryk Kosmider/Fotolia

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The Valley of the Kings was the burial site of almost all the kings (pharaohs) of the 18th, 19th, and 20th dynasties (about 1539–1075 BC).

Haloorange

Amenhotep III, who reigned from 1390 to 1353 BC, built the wonderful temple at Luxor and put up the famous pair of colossal seated statues called the Colossi of Memnon. In the Middle Kingdom period, the pharaohs of Thebes had built modest brick pyramids for their tombs. In the New Kingdom period, they broke with this tradition and began to hew tombs deep in the cliffs of an isolated valley west of Thebes. More than 60 tombs, containing pharaohs, several queens, and a few high-ranking officials, have been found in the Valley of the Kings.

In the last years of his reign, Amenhotep III paid little attention to the empire. It was already decaying when his son Amenhotep IV came to the throne in 1353 BC. This king was more interested in religion than in warfare. Even before his father’s death, he began to promote a new religious doctrine. He wanted the people to give up all their old gods and worship only the radiant sun, which was then called Aton. He changed his name to Akhenaton (“beneficial to Aton”). He left Thebes and built a splendid new capital sacred to Aton at a site he called Akhetaton (now Tell el-Amarna) in middle Egypt. Throughout the land he had the word “gods” and the name of the widely worshipped god Amon removed from tombs and monuments.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



A gold funerary mask is a treasure from the tomb of King Tutankhamen in Thebes, Egypt, 14th century BC. The mask is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

© Lee Boltin

Akhenaton’s idea of a single god gained no hold on the Egyptian people. His successor, Tutankhamen, who ruled from 1333 to 1323 BC, moved the capital back to Thebes and restored the name of Amon on monuments. Tutankhamen is famous chiefly for his lavishly furnished tomb. British archaeologist Howard Carter discovered it in the Valley of the Kings in AD 1922. Its treasures reveal the luxury of the most magnificent period of Egyptian history.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



A huge statue of the pharaoh Ramses II stands at the temple of Luxor in Egypt.

© Mypix/Dreamstime.com

During the long reign of Ramses II, from 1279 to 1213 BC, an impressive amount of building took place. Ramses II completed the gigantic hall at Karnak and set up many statues of himself. He also had his name carved on monuments built by earlier rulers, so that he became better known than any other king. Although Ramses II regained part of Egypt's Asian empire, the kings who followed him had to use the army to defend Egypt against invaders.

The Late Period

In the Late period, the final decline of Egypt's power set in. Extensive building projects and the needs of the army drained the treasury. Hungry workers had to resort to strikes to get their wages in grain. The central government weakened, and the country split up once more into small states.

In the 8th century BC, invaders from Kush, in southern Nubia, entered Egypt and established a strong, new dynasty. However, they were unable to withstand an invasion from the north by the Assyrians. When Assyria's power waned, a new Egyptian dynasty reorganized the country. Persia conquered Egypt in 525 BC and held it until 404 BC. Three brief Egyptian dynasties followed, ending with the 30th, which fell to a second Persian conquest in 343 BC.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Postdynastic Periods



Alexander the Great appears in a detail from the 17th-century painting *Alexander and Porus* by Charles Le Brun.

© Heritage Images—Hulton Fine Art Collection/Getty Images

Persian rule lasted until the Macedonian king Alexander the Great invaded Egypt in 332 BC. The Egyptians welcomed Alexander as a liberator from the oppressive control of the Persians. After his death in 323 BC, Ptolemy I Soter, one of his generals, seized the throne. Thus began the Ptolemaic period. Under the Ptolemies, Egypt grew rich and powerful. Ptolemy and his descendants introduced Greek manners and ideas into Egypt. They reorganized the kingdom’s administration and economy. Alexander the Great had founded the city of Alexandria in 332 BC It became Egypt’s capital and the center of Greek civilization in the eastern Mediterranean.



Ptolemy XV Caesar (right) and his mother, Cleopatra, are carved in a relief in the Temple of Hathor in Dandarah, Egypt. Cleopatra was the last of the Ptolemaic rulers.

Olaf Tausch

The Ptolemaic rule of Egypt ended with Queen Cleopatra. She was co-ruler of Egypt from 51 to 30 BC—first with one of her brothers, then with another brother, and finally with Ptolemy XV Caesar, her son by the Roman leader Julius Caesar. But Cleopatra had made powerful enemies. She aligned herself with the Roman leader Mark Antony, but another powerful Roman, Octavian (later Augustus), eventually defeated their forces in Egypt. Cleopatra and Mark Antony committed suicide in 30 BC. Egypt was thereafter proclaimed a province of Rome.

The Romans introduced important changes in Egypt's administrative system. They wanted to achieve a high level of efficiency and to maximize revenue. As a result, they started a complex taxation system. As for cultural patterns, the Greek-speaking elite were held in higher esteem than other Egyptians. Alexandria continued to foster Greek culture and intellectual pursuits.

The Roman Empire was divided in half in the 4th century AD. The Byzantine emperors then began to rule Egypt from Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey). Although Egypt remained prosperous, the Byzantines tightly controlled the government. They ruthlessly collected taxes and punished those who tried to avoid paying.

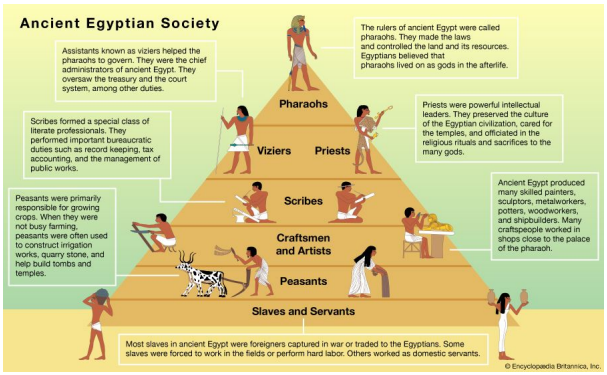
During the Byzantine period most Egyptians converted to Christianity. Churches and monasteries began to dominate Egypt's landscape. By the 5th and 6th centuries, the economic and social power of the Christian church had spread throughout the Nile River valley. However, the growth of Christianity in Egypt was checked in the 7th century, when Egypt fell to the Arabs. In time, the Egyptians converted to Islam.(For later Egyptian history, *see* Egypt.)

Periods in early Egyptian history	
Prehistoric period	before about 2925 BC
Early Dynastic period (1st–3rd dynasties)	about 2925–about 2575 BC
Old Kingdom (4th–8th dynasties)	about 2575–about 2130 BC
First Intermediate period (9th–11th dynasties)	about 2130–1938 BC

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Middle Kingdom (12th–13th dynasties)	1938–about 1630 BC
Second Intermediate period (14th–17th dynasties)	about 1630–1540 BC
New Kingdom (18th–20th dynasties)	about 1539–1075 BC
Third Intermediate period (21st–25th dynasties)	1075–656 BC*
Late period (26th–30th dynasties)	664–332 BC
Ptolemaic period	332–30 BC
Roman period	30 BC–AD 395
Byzantine period	AD 395–642
*The dates between the Third Intermediate period and the Late period are not consecutive because separate pharaohs ruling in different regions of Egypt had overlapping reigns.	

Everyday Life in Ancient Egypt



The ancient Egyptians were grouped into various social classes. The kings (pharaohs) were the most powerful, while the slaves were the lowest class.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Patrick O'Neill Riley

People today live in an age when every year brings forth new inventions and discoveries, new fads and fashions that affect everyday life. Through communications, migration, and travel, foreign cultures merge into new lifestyles.

The Egyptians had their greatest creative period at the beginning of their long history. After that, their way of living changed little through the years. It is therefore possible to describe their homelife and their art without reference to the historical periods of Egyptian history.

Upper-Class Homelife and Dress

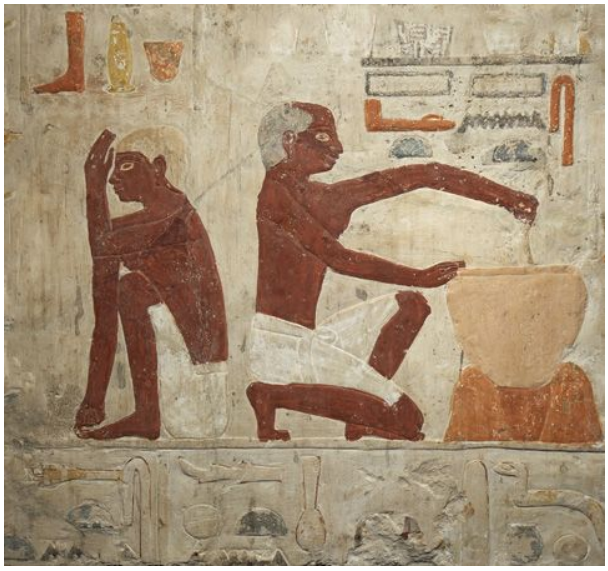
The sea on the north and deserts to the east and west protected Egypt. For many centuries the Egyptians could develop their own way of life without fear of invasion by foreign armies. They were interested in their homes and families and in their work. Their stone tombs were a kind of insurance against death, because they sought to prosper in an afterlife. They loved life and wanted it to go on forever.

The Egyptians situated their villages and towns near the Nile because it was the chief highway as well as the only source of water. Even the rich lived in houses of mud brick. The walls were richly colored. Windows were small, high openings covered with loosely woven matting to keep out the heat and glare of the sun. The most

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

fashionable district was near the king’s palace. Even there, houses were crowded close together to leave more space for farmland. Some dwellings were two stories high. The people usually built the houses back-to-back to save space. Some houses opened onto a narrow street, while others faced a small walled garden.

The Egyptians decorated the walls of their houses with bright murals. They covered the floors with straw matting and rugs. Their lamps were saucers of oil with a floating wick. Rich people had beds, chairs, and stools but no real dining tables (*see* furniture, “Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome”). They kept their clothes and linen sheets in box chests or in baskets. Dirty linen was sent to professional laundrymen to be washed in the river.



Workers prepare dough for baking bread, in an ancient Egyptian painting from about 2500–2350 BC.

© jsp/Shutterstock

The ancient Egyptians stored their water and food in huge pottery jars. To prepare foods, cooks used pottery bowls, placing them directly on the fire or in a clay oven. They baked bread and cake and roasted beef, mutton, or wildfowl. The common drinks were beer, wine, and milk. Honey and dates were the main sweets. Workers belonging to the estate on which the family lived grew or made almost everything the family needed.



Men waiting to have their hair cut by a barber (at lower left), in a modern painted copy of an ancient Egyptian tomb painting. The original artwork was made in 1427–00 BCE.

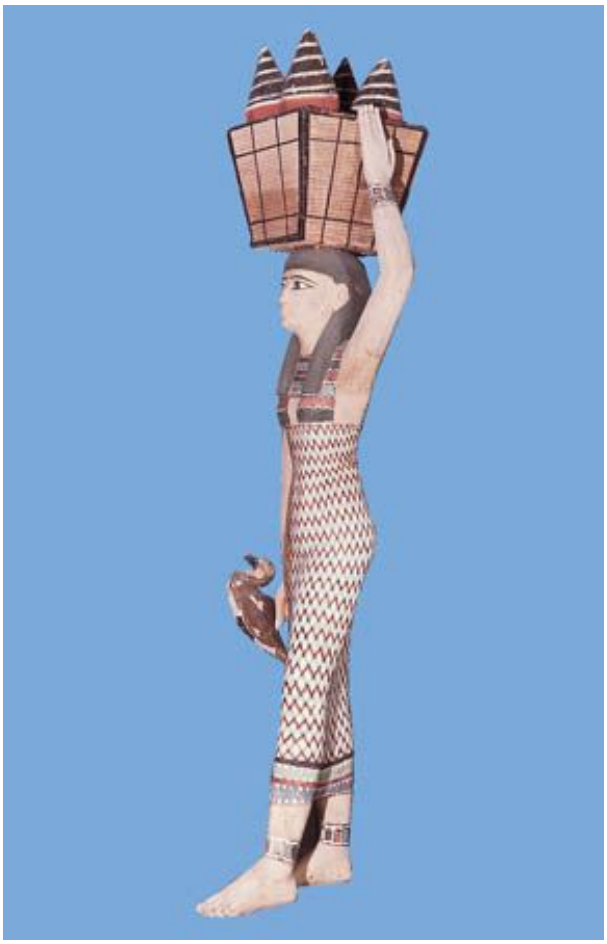
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.4.40), www. metmuseum.org

The members of Egypt’s upper classes spent much of their time tending to their appearance. They bathed with soda instead of soap and then rubbed perfumed oil into the skin. Men shaved with a bronze razor. They cut their

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

hair short or shaved it off to stay cool and to keep lice away. Some of them wore wigs. Women also sometimes shaved their heads. They wore wigs or added false braids to their own hair. They had combs and hairpins and mirrors of polished bronze or silver.

Both men and women darkened the skin around their eyes with black paint called kohl. Many applied green pigment to their eyelids. Women rouged their cheeks and lips and stained their nails with henna. The Egyptians wore cosmetics not only to look good but also to protect their skin from the harsh environment. They thought cosmetics could protect them from evil as well. The Egyptians also used oils and perfumes to keep their skin supple and their body and clothes smelling fresh. The women usually kept their cosmetics in ivory pots that they placed in small box chests.



Woman wearing sheathlike gown held up by shoulder straps, typical of Egyptian dress of the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Painted wood statue from the tomb of Meketre, Dayr al-Baḥrī, Egypt, 11th dynasty (2081–1938 BC). In the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

Borromeo/Art Resource, New York



© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

A collection of ancient Egyptian jewelry includes earrings and rings.

Photos.com/Thinkstock

Because of the hot climate, both men and women wore white linenclothes. Men usually wore only a skirt. In the early centuries the skirts were short and narrow, but later they were long and full. Women wore low-cut white dresses with a band over one or both shoulders. Young children wore nothing at all. Both men and women wore jewelry—collars and necklaces, strings of beads, bracelets, anklets, earrings, and finger rings. Wealthy people had jewelry made from gold, silver, semiprecious stones, and glass beads. Commoners wore jewelry of copper, clay, stone, and shell. Many people favored amulets shaped as the sacred scarab beetle. The scarab beetle was associated with Khepri, the god of the morning sun.

Peasants, Craftsmen, and Slaves

The continual labor of the peasants who tilled the soil made possible the luxurious life of the pharaoh and the nobles. After the peasants harvested the crops, the pharaoh could call on them to perform work for the state. The peasants would leave their village huts and go off to labor on irrigation works, to quarry stone with primitive tools, or to build tombs and temples. Their only pay was grain from the state granaries, oil, fish, vegetables, and clothing.

The craftsmen and artists had an easier life. They worked in shops close to the palace of the pharaoh or on the estates of priests and nobles. Their professions were hereditary, passed down from father to son.

The highly skilled smiths forged bronze tools and weapons and made fine copper and bronze dishes for the homes of the rich Egyptians. Goldsmiths and silversmiths also made tableware as well as richly wrought jewelry. The jewelry was set with turquoise, carnelian, lapis lazuli, and other semiprecious stones and gems. Stone craftsmen ground out vases, jars, bowls, and platters in hard diorite and porphyry or in soft, cream-colored alabaster. The alabaster could be ground so thin it let the light shine through.

Potters produced clay vessels on a hand-turned potter’s wheel and then baked them in closed clay furnaces. They covered some of the pottery with a blue glaze. Women wove sheer fabrics of linen for clothing and for tapestries and awnings to decorate the houses of the rich.

Egypt then as now had little timber. The Egyptians imported cedar and cypress from Lebanon and tropical woods from Nubia. Cabinetmakers fashioned chairs and couches. Other craftsmen overlaid the furniture with precious metals or inlaid it with ebony or ivory. Leatherworkers contributed cushions. Shipbuilders made Nile vessels with curving hulls and tall sails and cargo ships to sail to foreign lands. Paperworkers used the papyrus reeds gathered from the Nile marshes. They split the reeds and pasted them crosswise into double sheets of pale yellow writing paper.

Although slavery was not common in ancient Egypt, some people were kept as slaves. These slaves were generally foreigners—non-Egyptians taken captive in war or traded to the Egyptians. However, poverty or debt forced some Egyptians to sell themselves into service. Some slaves worked as domestic servants in households, while others served as agricultural laborers in the fields. In the New Kingdom period, the Egyptian state obtained large numbers of prisoners of war who were put to work as slaves in major state institutions or forced to fight in the army. In order to punish slaves captured in war, the state could force them to perform hard labor, such as taking part in dangerous mining expeditions. Even state-owned slaves who were not being punished often had hazardous work, such as quarrying in the desert.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

It once was thought that slaves built the great pyramids of Egypt. Scholars today believe that peasants, not slaves, constructed the pyramids. The peasants worked on the pyramids when they were not busy farming (such as during the annual flooding of the Nile River).

Religion

In early times each Egyptian town had its own town god as well as a number of lesser gods. There were also gods that everybody worshipped. The most important of these were Re, the sun god; Horus, the sky god; and Osiris, the god of the dead.



Ancient Egyptian temples and obelisks still stand at Karnak, Egypt.

Contunico © ZDF Studios GmbH, Mainz; Thumbnail © Adrian Martinez/Dreamstime.com

When a town grew in influence, its town god became more important, too. People worshipped him as part of their allegiance to the town. After Thebes became the capital, the worship of its town god, Amon, spread throughout Egypt. The people combined his worship with that of Re, and in this form called him Amon-Re. They raised temples to Amon throughout Egypt, with the most splendid one at Karnak, in Thebes.

Major gods and goddesses of Egyptian mythology

name	realm	also called
Amen	one of the chief Theban deities; united with sun god under form of Amen-Ra	Amon, Ammon, Aman, Amun
Anubis	guide of souls to the underworld; son of Osiris; jackal-headed	Anpu
Apis	sacred bull, an embodiment of Ptah; identified with Osiris as Osiris-Apis or Serapis	Hap, Hapy
Bast	goddess of music; cat-headed	Bastet, Pasht, Ubastet
Geb	earth god; father of Osiris; represented with a goose on his head	Keb, Seb
Hathor	goddess of love and mirth; cow-headed	Athor
Horus	god of day; son of Osiris and Isis; hawk-headed	—
Isis	goddess of motherhood and fertility; sister and wife of Osiris	—
Khepera	god of morning sun; scarab beetle-headed	Khepra, Khepri, Khopri, Kheprer
Khnemu	god who shaped humans on his potter's wheel; ram-headed	Khnum, Chnuphis, Chnemu, Chnum, Khnoumis
Khonsu	god of fertility and childbirth; son of Amen and Mut	Khensu, Khuns, Khons,

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

		Chunsu
Ma'at	goddess of law, justice, and truth; daughter of Ra	Maat, Mayet, Maa, Maet, Maht, Maut
Mentu	solar deity, sometimes considered god of war; hawk-headed	Ment, Menthu, Mont, Munt
Min	god of fertility	Amsu
Mut	mother goddess; wife of Amen	Maut
Nekhbet	goddess of Upper Eygpt and patroness of childbirth	Nekhebet, Nechbet
Nephthys	goddess of the dead; sister and wife of Seth	—
Nu	chaos from which the world was created, personified as a god	Nun
Nut	goddess of heavens; consort of Geb	—
Osiris	god of the underworld and judge of the dead; son of Geb and Nut	—
Ptah	chief deity of the city of Memphis; god of arts and crafts	Phtha
Ra	god of the sun, the supreme god; pharaohs claimed descent from him; represented as a hawk, a lion, or a cat	Re, Phra
Sekhmet	warlike sun goddess	—
Serapis	god uniting attributes of Osiris and Apis	Sarapis
Seth	god of darkness or evil; brother and enemy of Osiris	Set
Shu	god of air; father of Nut and Geb	Su
Tefnut	goddess of moisture and rainfall; wife and sister of Shu	Tefenet
Tem	solar deity associated with setting sun; father of Shu and Tefnut	Atmu, Atum, Atem, Temu
Thoth	god of wisdom and magic; scribe of the gods; ibis-headed	Dhouti, Tahuti, Zehutia, Techa, Thout, Djehuti

The Story of Re and Osiris



The Osiris shaft, a symbolic tomb of the god Osiris, lies under the plain of Giza, Egypt.

Contunico © ZDF Studios GmbH, Mainz; Thumbnail The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.4.157)

The people believed that every day Re, the sun, sailed across the sky in his boat. Every night he disappeared into the underworld, in the west. In the underworld, they thought, was another Nile River. Osiris, the ruler of the underworld, had the sun’s boat pulled along this river until at last it crossed the horizon and the sun rose again.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Osiris had been murdered by his brother Seth but lived again in the underworld as king of the dead. The people looked to Osiris to give them, too, a life after death. Osiris was usually shown in human form, tightly swathed in linen like a mummy and wearing a high crown.

Other Gods and Sacred Animals



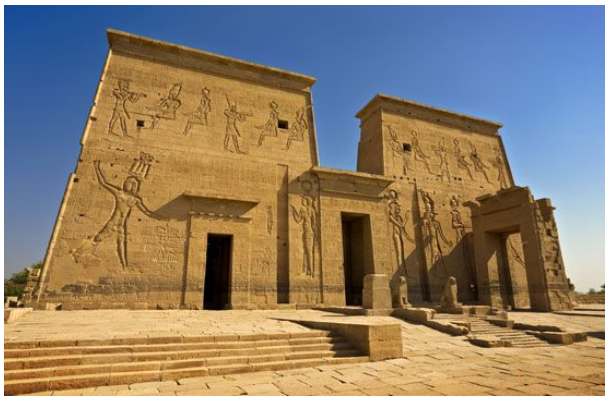
The Egyptian creation god Khnum (seated) appears with the head of a ram in a relief from the temple of Khnum at Esna, Egypt.

© Paul Vinten/Dreamstime.com

Other important deities included Nut and Hathor, goddesses of the sky and of joy. The god Ptah was a master artist and craftsman. Thoth, the moon god, was also scribe of the gods and the inventor of writing. The creator god Khnum fashioned men and women on a potter's wheel. Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, was a mother goddess believed to have great magical powers. Some gods, such as Amon and Osiris, were always represented in purely human form. Others were pictured as animals or with human bodies and animal heads. Thus Horus was worshipped in the form of a hawk, or falcon, or of a hawk-headed man. Thoth was shown with the head of an ibis, and Khnum with the head of a ram. Hathor was worshipped in the form of a cow. The sun had various symbols—the obelisk, the sacred scarab beetle, the cobra, and the sun disk.

The Egyptians carefully kept certain sacred animals in the temples. In the later periods, they made mummies of animals of all kinds. Some of the mummies were of pets, and they were buried alongside their owners. Many animal mummies were offered as gifts to the gods. Egyptian priests also embalmed millions of certain sacred animals, including crocodiles, cats, and ibis, and buried them in special cemeteries. They buried bulls in stone vaults in an underground cemetery called the Serapeum, on the west bank of the Nile near Saqqarah.

Architecture of the Temples



© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

An ancient Egyptian temple honoring the goddess Isis originally stood on Philae, an island in the Nile River. In modern times, the temple was taken apart and rebuilt on a nearby island in Lake Nasser (because construction of a new dam would completely flood Philae).

© Witr/Dreamstime.com

The ancient Egyptians built temples as homes for their gods. They designed the architecture to blend into the setting of the Nile valley, which is flat and walled in on both sides by sheer limestone cliffs. The Egyptians thus built gigantic stone temples with flat surfaces. The form is rectangular, like that of the flat-topped cliffs. The only decorations are reliefs and inscriptions that do not break the straight lines of the stone surfaces on which they are carved. They decorated and inscribed private tombs in the same way.



The avenue of sphinxes connects the temple complex at Luxor to the Great Temple of Amon at Karnak in Egypt.

© Photos.com/Jupiterimages

The ancient Egyptians built the temples on a grand scale. The front wall consisted of two massive sloping towers, together called a pylon, with a door between them. The door gave entrance to a huge unroofed courtyard, bordered on two or three sides by colonnades. The public assembled there for worship. Beyond the court rose the hypostyle hall—a forest of huge pillars holding up a roof. Past the hall was the sanctuary of the temple god. Only priests and the pharaoh were allowed to enter the sanctuary. There were many variations of this plan. Large temples—particularly the great temple at Karnak—had a series of courts, each faced by a pylon, and several sanctuaries. An avenue of sphinxes led from Karnak to the temple at Luxor.

Death and Afterlife



Murals in an ancient Egyptian tomb show scenes from the afterlife. The paintings are in the Tomb of Sennedjem, in Thebes, Egypt.

Sylvain Grandadam/age fotostock

The ancient Egyptians believed that they would be reborn after death. Their mortuary practices were designed to ensure a safe and successful passage into the hereafter. Their best-known practice was mummification, the

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

process of preserving a dead body as a mummy. The Egyptians believed that the body must continue intact for the deceased to live in the next world.



Embalmers mummify a body in ancient Egypt.

Dorling Kindersley RF/Thinkstock

The mummification process varied according to the cost of the procedure. The most elaborate Egyptian process was used for royalty and the wealthy. It took about 70 days, and special priests performed the rituals. They removed most of the internal organs and embalmed them. In the early days they placed the organs in vessels called canopic jars and buried them with the body. However, in later years the organs were placed back within the body. The priests then washed the body with palm wine and covered it with natron, a salt. It was left that way for many days to remove all moisture. The workers then treated the body with oils and spices to help preserve it. They finally wrapped it in strips of linen and placed it in a decorated coffin.

Pharaohs and their relatives and many noble people were buried in elaborate tombs, such as pyramids. Common people were buried in shallow pits in the sand. The families of the dead buried objects with the deceased people. These were items that the deceased would need in their next life. They included furniture, clothes, jewelry, and food. The more important and wealthier the person, the more expensive and abundant the items. Priests conducted special rituals intended to enable the deceased to journey to the afterlife. Wall and coffin paintings often displayed prayers, hymns, and spells believed to protect and aid the deceased in the hereafter.

Art and Literature



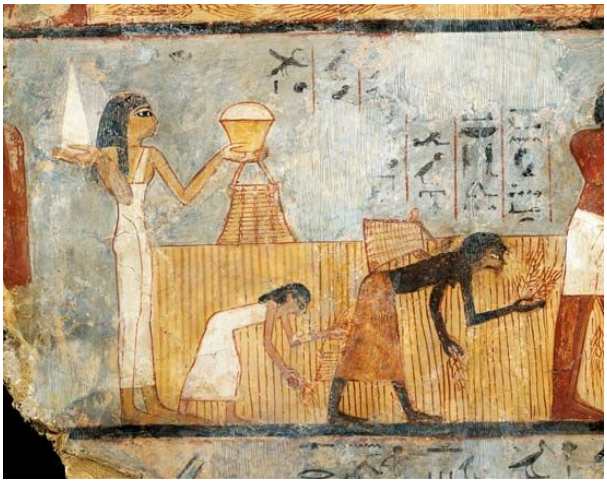
An ancient Egyptian mural shows the pharaoh Horemheb (left) with a falcon-headed god. The mural is in a tomb at Saqqarah, Egypt.

Photos.com/Jupiterimages

Ancient Egyptians created art in many forms, including paintings, sculptures, and pottery. Many works are connected with the afterlife and were placed in tombs with the deceased. These range from wall paintings to carved amulets to extensively decorated canopic jars. Egyptian writing evolved from hieroglyphics carved in stone to a cursive script written in ink with a reed pen on papyrus.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Painting and Sculpture



A wall painting from a New Kingdom tomb shows a woman bringing food to workers in the fields.

© DEA Picture Library—De Agostini/Getty Images

The walls of Egyptian tombs were commonly decorated with relief sculptures. Wall paintings took the place of reliefs in many private tombs of the New Kingdom. Some of the paintings and reliefs of this period rank with the world's finest masterpieces in art. In order to appreciate them, it is necessary to understand the principles upon which Egyptian artists worked.

Like other early peoples, the Egyptians did not use perspective. They drew figures at different distances from the observer in the same size. They used the size of the figures to show their relative importance. The artists drew humble people and servants smaller than the great lord. Furthermore, the artists did not limit themselves to a single point of view. They drew what they knew, not merely what they saw. Artists might show a fisherman in a boat as if one were looking at the scene from the shore, but fish would be shown swimming under the water. The same picture might even outline the pond as if seen from above. Egyptian paintings are beautiful and harmonious, and they reveal more than they would if drawn from a single point of view.

In portraying the human figure, artists usually followed conventions established in early times. Since the artists wanted to show all the principal parts of the body, they combined front and side views. The head is always in profile, but the eye is drawn as it appears from the front. The shoulders and skirt are front view, but the legs and feet are side view. There were also set rules about the proportions to be used for the parts of the body. Walls prepared for decoration were marked with guidelines or grids of squares to aid the artist in following these conventions.



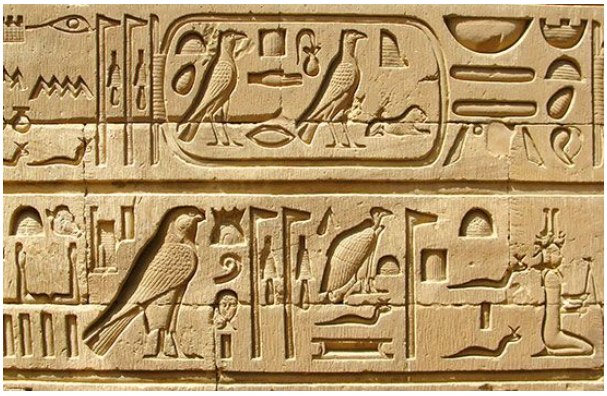
© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

An ancient Egyptian statue shows a baker kneading dough. The ancient Egyptians would make models of items they thought a dead person might need in the afterlife.

Photos.com/Thinkstock

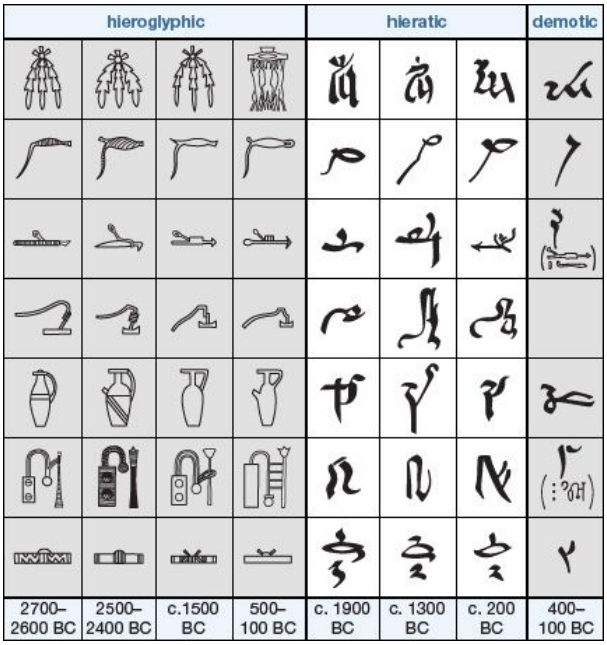
Sculptors carved thousands of statues in all sizes, from colossal figures to miniatures. In addition to gods, kings, and nobles, their works included animals and sphinxes. They always showed the pharaoh in a dignified pose, never in movement. The face is often an expressive portrait. Sculptors painted the bodies of men red and women pale yellow and set in eyeballs of colored stone or crystal.

Three Ways of Writing



Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics—characters of a writing system that uses pictures and symbols—appear on a temple near Kawm Umbu, Egypt.

© Icon72/Dreamstime.com



The hieroglyphics and their hieratic and demotic equivalents give evidence of having evolved over several centuries. The symbols represent, top to bottom, three fox skins tied together, a whip, a harpoon, an adz, a stone jug, a scribe's outfit, and a roll of papyrus tied with a cord.

From G. Moller, Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins fur Buchwesen und Schrifttum, ii (1919), 78

The ancient Egyptians had three different ways of writing. They are called hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic. They developed hieroglyphics first. The Egyptians chiseled hieroglyphs—characters in the form of pictures—on a

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

stone surface. The word *hieroglyph* comes from two Greek words—*hieros*, meaning “sacred,” and *glyphein*, meaning “to carve.” From hieroglyphs the Egyptians developed a cursive writing. Called hieratic, this was written on papyrus with a pen. Out of hieratic a much more rapid script—demotic—developed in the Late period.

Hieroglyphic writing developed out of picture writing toward the end of the prehistoric period. Picture recording evolved into writing with the realization that pictures could be used to express ideas if the words for these ideas had the same sounds as the names of the objects pictured. The picture of a house meant *house*, but it could also stand for the sound of the word for *house*, which is *pr*. The Egyptians did not write vowels. Because the word for *to go* also consisted of the consonants *pr* with a different vowel sound, the sign for *house* could be used to write *to go* by adding to it a pair of walking legs. The legs sign—called a determinative—was not pronounced but indicated a verb of motion. Hieroglyphic writing was therefore sound writing. Some of the pictures stood for one consonant and were thus alphabetic, while others were used to represent two or three consonants.

In hieratic and demotic writing, the signs no longer resembled the pictures from which they were developed. Rapid cursive writing with a pen on the soft surface of papyrus led to shortening the signs.

The ability to read hieroglyphics died out with the Egyptian religion. Throughout the Middle Ages people thought the inscriptions on monuments were not writing but symbols with some deep religious meaning.



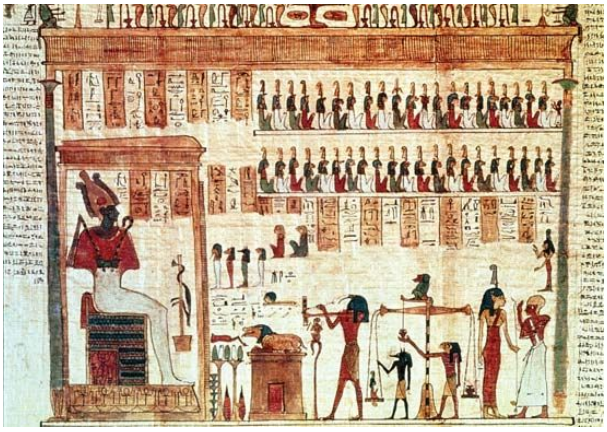
The Rosetta Stone, from about 196 BC, has Egyptian hieroglyphics in the top section, demotic characters in the middle, and Greek at the bottom.

© Photos.com/Getty Images Plus

When the French leader Napoleon went to Egypt in 1798, he took with him a large staff of scholars and scientists to study the civilization of ancient Egypt. Near Rosetta (Rashid), one of his officers discovered a stone—now known as the Rosetta Stone—inscribed with three kinds of writing. Napoleon’s scholars recognized the writing as Greek at the bottom, demotic in the middle, and hieroglyphic at the top. They could read the ancient Greek and guessed that the other sections must have the same content.

The stone fell into the hands of the British, who sent copies to scholars throughout the world. In 1822 French historian and linguist Jean-François Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphs. Written about 196 BC, they commemorate the accession of Ptolemy V Epiphanes about 205 BC. Champollion's work was the basis of the science of Egyptology.

Literature of Ancient Egypt



The Book of the Dead is a collection of ancient Egyptian mortuary texts that include spells or magic formulas. They were placed in tombs and believed to protect and aid the deceased in the hereafter.

Photos.com/Thinkstock

Ancient Egyptian literature consists of both religious and nonreligious texts. The principal religious texts were made up of prayers, hymns, and spells designed to guide the dead into the underworld. In the Old Kingdom period, the Egyptians wrote such texts on the burial chamber walls in the pyramids of the 5th and 6th dynasties. They are thus called Pyramid Texts. Later, the Egyptians wrote what are now called Coffin Texts on the coffins of private citizens. Still later, scribes copied these religious texts and other writings—now called the *Book of the Dead*—on papyrus rolls, which were buried with the dead. Nonreligious writings relate events in the lives of kings or citizens. Ancient Egyptian texts also covered such topics as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and magic. (*See also* ancient civilization.)

George R. HughesEd.

Citation (MLA style):

"Ancient Egypt." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 6 Jan. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

ARTICLE

ancient civilization

Britannica Note:

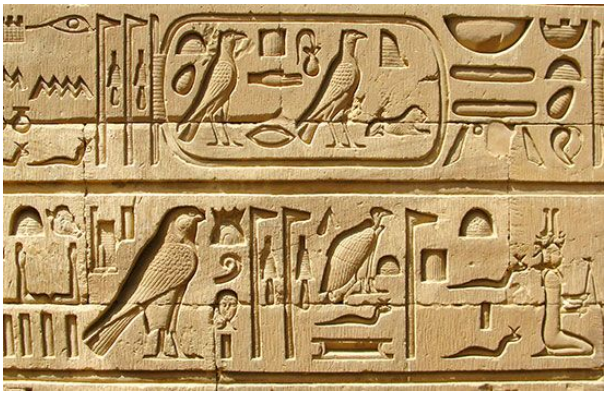
Learn more about this topic by reading the section "Egypt."

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

ancient civilization

> *Britannica Note:*
>
> Learn more about this topic by reading the section "Egypt."

Why were ancient settlements typically located near a river?Why was the development of farming a turning point in human history?What did the major ancient civilizations have in common?What were the most important achievements of ancient civilizations?If you could travel back in time to visit one ancient civilization, which one would you choose?



Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics—characters of a writing system that uses pictures and symbols—appear on a temple near Kawm Umbu, Egypt.

© Icon72/Dreamstime.com

The term *civilization* basically means the level of development at which people live together peacefully in communities. Ancient civilization refers specifically to the first settled and stable communities that became the basis for later states, nations, and empires.

The study of ancient civilization is concerned with the earliest segments of the much broader subject called ancient history. The span of ancient history began with the invention of writing about 3100 BC and lasted for more than 35 centuries. Humankind existed long before the written word, but writing made the keeping of a historical record possible (*see*human origins).

The first ancient societies arose in Mesopotamia and Egypt in the Middle East, in the Indus valley region of what are now Pakistan and India, in the Huang He (Yellow River) valley of China, on the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea, and in Central America. All these civilizations had certain features in common. They built cities and invented forms of writing. They learned to make pottery and use metals. They domesticated animals, and they created fairly complex social structures with class systems.

Apart from written records and carved inscriptions, the knowledge about ancient peoples is derived from the work of archaeologists. Most of the significant archaeological findings have been made in the past 200 years. The Sumerian culture of Mesopotamia was discovered in the 1890s, and some of the most important archaeological digs in China were made after the late 1970s.

Agriculture—The Basis of Civilization

The single, decisive factor that made it possible for humankind to settle in permanent communities was agriculture. A turning point in human history, the invention of farming and the tremendous changes it brought about have been called the agricultural revolution. After farming was developed in the Middle East about 6500 BC , people living in tribes or family units did not have to be on the move continually searching for food or herding their animals. Once people could control the production of food and be assured of a reliable annual supply of it, their lives changed completely.

People began to found permanent communities in fertile river valleys. They settled around rivers for a number of reasons. Rivers were an important source of fresh water for drinking. They could be used for transportation. Settlers also learned to use the water supply to irrigate the land for farming. Sedentary settlement, or being settled in one place, made it possible to domesticate animals in order to provide other sources of food and clothing.

Farming was indeed a revolutionary discovery. It not only made settlements possible—and ultimately the building of cities—but it also made available a reliable food supply. With more food available, more people could be fed. Populations therefore increased. The growing number of people available for more kinds of work led to the development of more complex social structures. With a food surplus, a community could support a variety of workers who were not farmers. The agricultural revolution thus resulted in a division of labor, with some people farming, while others worked at various crafts, such as making pottery, cloth, or tools. Craftspeople traded the goods they made to farmers for food.

Farming the world over has always relied upon a dependable water supply. For the earliest societies this meant rivers and streams or regular rainfall. The first great civilizations grew up along rivers. Later communities were able to develop by taking advantage of the rainy seasons.

All the ancient civilizations probably developed in much the same way, in spite of regional and climatic differences. As villages grew, the accumulation of more numerous and substantial goods became possible. Heavier pottery replaced animal-skin gourds as containers for food and liquids. Cloth could be woven from wool and flax. Permanent structures made of wood, brick, and stone could be built.

The science of mathematics was an early outgrowth of agriculture. People studied the movements of the Moon, Sun, and planets to calculate seasons. In so doing they created the first calendars. With a calendar it was possible to calculate the arrival of each growing season. Measurement of land areas was necessary if property was to be divided accurately. Measurements of amounts—for example, of seeds or grains—was also a factor in farming and housekeeping. Later came measures of value as commodity and money exchange became common.

The use of various ways of measuring led naturally to record keeping, and for this some form of writing was necessary. The earliest civilizations all seem to have used picture-writing—pictures representing both sounds and objects to the reader. The best known of the ancient writing systems is probably Egyptian hieroglyphics, a term meaning “sacred carvings,” since many of the earliest writings were inscribed on stone.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The Fertile Crescent includes the river valleys of the Nile and of the Tigris and Euphrates.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

All the major ancient civilizations—in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus valley, and China—emerged in the 4th millennium BC. Historians still debate over which one emerged first. It may well have been in the Middle East, in an area called the Fertile Crescent. This area stretches from the Nile River in Egypt northward along the coast of the historical region of Palestine, then eastward into Asia to include Mesopotamia. In this area people settled along the riverbanks and practiced field agriculture. This kind of farming depended on the reproduction of seed, normally from grain crops.

Mesopotamia



The world's earliest civilization developed in Mesopotamia.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Mesopotamia (from a Greek term meaning “between rivers”) lies between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, a region that is today part of Iraq. As early as 6500 BC small groups of farmers made their way to the river valleys. These early people of Mesopotamia are known as Ubaidians. On the floodplains they raised wheat, barley, and peas. They cut through the riverbanks so that water for their crops could flow to lower lying soil.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

These early irrigation systems were more fully developed by the Sumerians. They drained marshes and dug canals, dikes, and ditches. The need for cooperation on these large irrigation projects led to the growth of government and law. The Sumerians are thus credited with forming the earliest of the ancient civilizations.



A Sumerian box lyre, a common musical instrument of the ancient Middle East, was decorated with a carved bull's head. The wooden lyre, covered with gold and lapis lazuli, dates from 2700 BC. It was played in an upright position with both hands.
Lee Boltin

The land of the Sumerians was called Sumer (Shinar in the Bible). Their origins are shrouded in the past. They were not Semites, like most of the peoples of the region. The Sumerians spoke a language unrelated to other known tongues. They probably came to southern Mesopotamia from Anatolia (now the country of Turkey) between 3500 and 3000BC.

Sumerian towns and cities included Eridu, Nippur, Lagash, Kish, and Ur. The cities differed from primitive farming settlements. They were not composed of family-owned farms but were ringed by large tracts of land. These tracts were thought to be “owned” by a local god. A priest organized work groups of farmers to tend the land. The farmers provided barley, beans, wheat, olives, grapes, and flax for the community.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The ziggurat (temple tower) of the moon god Nanna at Ur in Sumer was built beginning about 2100 BC. The original structure had three levels. Each level was smaller than the one below, giving the ziggurat a pyramid shape. Only the first level and part of the second level remain today. In ancient times the three 100-step staircases on the northeastern side came together in a gateway, where a single staircase led to the second level. There another staircase led to the top level and to the door of the god's temple.

© Peter Sobolev/Dreamstime.com

These early cities, which existed by 3500 BC, were called temple towns because they were built around the temple of the local god. The temples were eventually placed atop towers called ziggurats. A ziggurat had multiple levels, each smaller than the one below. Ramps or staircases wound up around the exterior. Public buildings and marketplaces were built around these shrines.

The temple towns grew into city-states, which are considered the basis of the first true civilizations. At a time when only the most basic forms of transportation and communication were available, the city-state was the most governable type of human settlement. City-states were ruled by leaders called *ensi*s. They were probably authorized to control the local irrigation systems. The food surplus provided by the farmers supported these leaders as well as priests, artists, craftsmen, and others.



Cuneiform characters on an ancient Sumerian clay tablet record the distribution of barley and emmer, an early form of domesticated wheat. The tablet was made about 3000 BC.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Raymond and Beverly Sackler Gift, 1988, 1988.433.2

The Sumerians contributed to the development of metalworking, wheeled carts, and potter’s wheels. They may have invented the first form of writing. They engraved pictures on clay tablets in a form of writing known as cuneiform (meaning “wedge-shaped”). The tablets were used to keep the accounts of the temple food storehouses. Over time the pictures lost their form and changed into abstract symbols that represented sounds rather than words. The symbols could be strung together to represent many more words and ideas than pictures could.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The Sumerians developed the first calendar, which they adjusted to the phases of the Moon. The lunar calendar was adopted by the Semites, Egyptians, and Greeks. Trade increased between Sumerian cities and between Sumer and other, more distant regions. This led to the growth of a merchant class.

The Sumerians organized a complex mythology. It was based on the relationships among the various local gods of the temple towns. In Sumerian religion, the most important gods were seen as human forms of natural forces—sky, Sun, earth, water, and storm. Each of these gods was originally associated with a particular city. The gods were worshiped not only in the great temples but also in small shrines in family homes.

Warfare between cities eventually led to the rise of kings, called *lugal*s, whose authority replaced that of city-state rulers. Sumer became a more unified state, with a common culture and a centralized government. This led to the establishment of a bureaucracy and an army. By 2375 BC, most of Sumer was united under one king, Lugalzaggisi of Umma.

The Sumerians were conquered by their Semitic neighbors. But their civilization was carried on by their successors—the Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans.



The Code of Hammurabi, the most complete collection of Babylonian laws, is inscribed on a stela, or stone slab. The code dates from the 1700s BC. The stela is now in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

Art Media/Heritage-Images/age fotostock

The Babylonians made distinct contributions to the growth of civilization. They added to the knowledge of astronomy and mathematics. They built the first great capital city, Babylon. The Babylonian King Hammurabi set

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

forth the Code of Hammurabi in the late 18th century BC. This was the most complete compilation of Babylonian law and one of the first great law codes in the world.

Ancient Egypt



The pyramids at Giza, Egypt, were built in the 26th and 25th centuries BC.

Hisham Ibrahim/Getty Images

Egyptian farmers had settled in the long and narrow valley of the Nile River by 5000 BC. Within 2,000 years Egyptians had invented writing and built massive irrigation works. They had established a culture that bequeathed the pyramids and other magnificent monuments to posterity.



A papyrus painting from ancient Egypt shows a boat traveling on the Nile River.

© Keith Wheatley/stock.adobe.com

The ancient Egyptians depended heavily on the Nile River. The river created an oasis in the surrounding desert, providing water for drinking and for farming. Each year, the river rose, flooded, and fell. Its flooding deposited sediments along the riverbank, making the land good for farming. The fertility of the land and the general predictability of the Nile's flooding ensured farmers a high yield from a single annual crop. Eventually, the Egyptians could store large surpluses of grain, to trade and to keep in reserve in case of crop failures. Surplus crops would form the chief basis of ancient Egypt's great wealth. The Nile was also the society's most important transportation route.

Most of the ancient Egyptians lived in the Nile valley and delta, and nearly all were farmers. The primitive farming settlements of Egypt were concerned with the raising of grains, fruits and vegetables, and animals. These settlements slowly gave way to larger groupings of people. Probably the need to control the Nile floodwaters through dams and canals eventually led to the rise of government in the region.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

By the end of the prehistoric period before about 2925 BC, Egypt was divided into two kingdoms. Lower Egypt had its capital at Buto, while Upper Egypt was centered at Hierakonpolis. In this period travelers brought in ideas from Sumer, including the concepts of writing and the pottery wheel.

Egyptian civilization began with the unification in the 3rd millennium BC of the upper and lower regions by King Menes. He established a new capital at Memphis. In this era the Egyptians developed the first 365-day calendar. They invented the plow and made use of copper. They developed hieroglyphic writing and began to build with stone. Trade and exploration flourished.



A gold funerary mask of King Tutankhamen was discovered in his tomb at the Valley of the Kings in Thebes, Egypt. The mask is in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

© Photos.com/Jupiterimages/Thinkstock

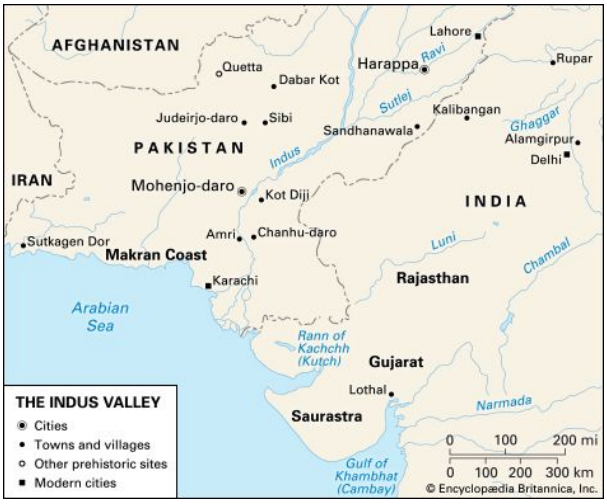
The Egyptians were ruled by kings known as pharaohs who claimed to be descended from the god Horus. These kings, supported by a priestly class, lived in splendor, and they saw to it that after their deaths they would be buried in splendor. The tombs built for them were designed as storehouses to hold all the things that the kings would need in the afterlife.

The earliest royal tombs foreshadowed the later great monuments, the pyramids. By about 2700 BC the first pyramid was built, in Saqqarah. The three great Pyramids of Giza still standing near Cairo were built in the 26th and 25th centuries BC.

Early Egyptian history is divided into three major eras: the Old Kingdom (about 2575–about 2130 BC), the Middle Kingdom (1938–about 1630 BC), and the New Kingdom (about 1539–1075 BC). By the dawn of the Old Kingdom, the characteristics of Egyptian civilization had already been firmly established. The periods not accounted for by the dates are believed to be times of decline known as the Intermediate periods.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Ancient India



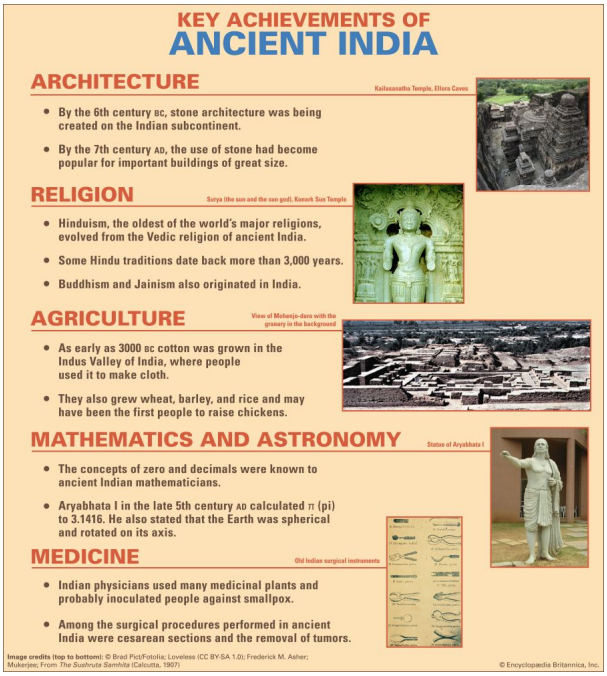
A map shows some of the cities and towns of the ancient Indus valley civilization, with some modern city and country names included.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



One of the world's earliest civilizations developed in the valley of the Indus River in what are now Pakistan and India.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The people of ancient India made notable contributions in many varied fields.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The valley of the Indus River is considered to be the birthplace of Indian civilization. Located on the Indian subcontinent, largely in what is now Pakistan, the Indus valley civilization was not discovered by archaeologists until 1924. The ancient history of this region is obscured by legend. It appears, however, that by 4000 BC primitive farmers were raising vegetables, grains, and animals along the riverbank. By 2700 BC two major cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, and numerous smaller towns had emerged.

There is some evidence that Mesopotamian traders reached the early people of the Indus valley by sailing there from Sumer. The Indus valley people shared some developments—such as complex irrigation and drainage systems and the art of writing—with the people of Sumer. However, the people of the Indus valley also developed a unique cultural style of their own.

What little is known of the Indus civilization suggests that it had large cities that were well laid out and well fortified. There were public buildings, palaces, baths, and large granaries to hold agricultural produce. The many artifacts and artworks found by archaeologists indicate that the residents of the Indus had reached a fairly high level of culture before their civilization was destroyed.

The Vedic people, who were nomads from the Eurasian steppes, migrated to the Indus valley beginning about 1500 BC. They introduced a caste system, which persists to the present day. The caste system divides all people into social classes with differing rights and obligations. It was a formal expression of the interdependent labor division seen in all civilizations. By the 6th century BC at least 16 states had been established on the Indian subcontinent.

Ancient Crete



A spouted jar was created by the Minoan civilization of Crete about 1900–1700 BC. It is now in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (Irákleio), Crete, Greece.

Hirmer Fotoarchiv, Munich

By about 2500 BC a civilization had emerged on the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea. Excavations in 1900 at the site of Knossos revealed the existence of a culture named by archaeologists as Minoan after a mythical king, Minos. Minoans probably settled in Crete before 3000 BC.

There is evidence of outside influence in Crete; apparently Egyptian traders reached the Aegean Sea soon after the Minoans did. Nevertheless, Minoan civilization developed its own unique features. By about 2000 BC, great cities with elaborate and luxurious palaces were built, and sea trade was flourishing.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The Minoan culture developed a writing system using pictures. This ancient clay writing tablet was made in Crete, probably in the 15th century BC.

© Zde (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The Minoans had a picture-writing system, as had other ancient peoples. The Minoan religion seems to have centered on a mother goddess and on the figures of the bull and the snake. The Minoans are known for their beautiful and colorful wall paintings and their fine pottery. About 1400 BC Minoan civilization began to decline. The end was hastened by invasions from mainland Greece. (*See also* Aegean civilization.)

Ancient China



The principal settlements of ancient China were located along the country's major rivers, the Yangtze and the Huang He.

Adapted from A. Herrmann, 'An Historical Atlas of China' (1966); Aldine Publishing Company



The people of ancient China made important achievements in many fields.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski

The Chinese had settled in the Huang He, or Yellow River, valley of northern China by 3000 BC. By then they had pottery, wheels, farms, and silk, but they had not yet discovered writing or the uses of metals.

The Shang Dynasty (1600?–1046 BC) is the first documented era of ancient China. The highly developed hierarchy consisted of a king, nobles, commoners, and slaves. The capital city was Anyang, in what is now north Henan province. Some scholars have suggested that travelers from Mesopotamia and from Southeast Asia brought agricultural methods to China, which stimulated the growth of ancient Chinese civilization. The Shang peoples were known for their use of jade, bronze, horse-drawn chariots, ancestor worship, and highly organized armies.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



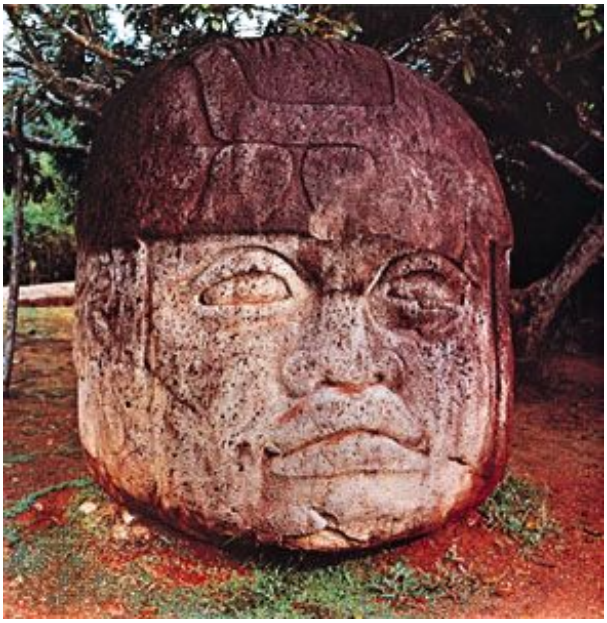
An animal bone from China's Shang period—between about 1600 and 1046 BC—is inscribed with characters of the earliest known form of Chinese writing. Such writing also appears on shells. Priests used such oracle bones and shells to foretell the future.

© Werner Forman—Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Like other ancient peoples, the Chinese developed unique attributes. Their form of writing, probably developed by 2000 BC, was a complex system that used characters that stood for words or parts of words. Such early forms of Chinese became known through the discovery by archaeologists of oracle bones, which were bones with writings inscribed on them. They were used for fortune-telling and record keeping in ancient China.

The Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC) saw the full flowering of ancient civilization in China. During this period the empire was unified, a middle class arose, and iron was introduced. The sage Confucius (551–479 BC) developed the code of ethics that dominated Chinese thought and culture for the next 25 centuries.

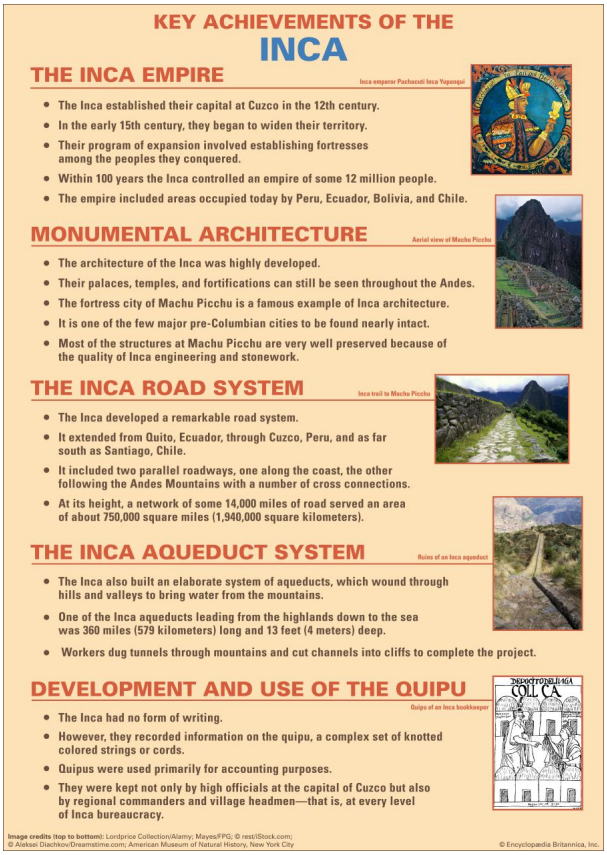
Ancient Meso-America and South America



The Olmec of Central Mexico carved enormous heads out of volcanic rock.

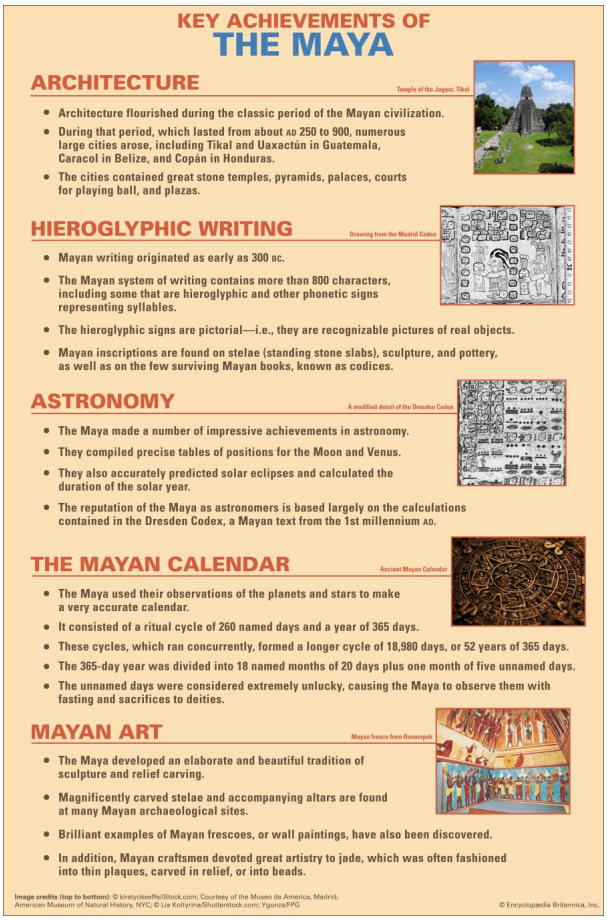
George Holton/Photo Researchers

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The Inca once ruled a vast empire in South America. They were highly accomplished in architecture, engineering, and other fields.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski



The Maya made notable achievements in a number of fields, including architecture, astronomy, and art.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski

Meso-America is the term used to describe the ancient settlements of Mexico and Central America. The earliest elaborate civilization known in the Americas is that of the Olmec of central Mexico. The Olmec lived in the lowlands of what are now Veracruz and Tabasco states from about 1200 BC. They left artifacts ranging from tiny jade carvings to huge monuments such as the volcanic rock statues at San Lorenzo. These monuments suggest the existence of an organized and diverse society with leaders who could command the work of artisans and laborers. Among the many other complex pre-Columbian civilizations in Central and South America were the Chavín, Nazca, Moche, and Inca of Peru, the Chibcha and Tairona of Colombia, the Marajoara and Tapajó of Brazil, the Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula, and the Aztec of Mexico. (*See also*American Indians; Middle American Indians; Central American and Northern Andean Indians; Central Andean Indians; Rainforest Indians; South American Nomadic Indians.)

Only four ancient civilizations—Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus valley, and China—provided the basis for continuous cultural developments in the same location. After the Minoan society on Crete was destroyed, its cultural traditions and legends passed into the life of mainland Greece. As for Meso-America and South America, their cultures were submerged by the Spanish conquerors of the 16th century.

Additional Reading

BRIER, BOB, AND HOBBS, HOYT. *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians* (Greenwood, 2008). CHRISP, PETER. *Atlas of Ancient Worlds* (DK, 2009). CONNOLLY, SEAN. *The Americas and the Pacific* (Zak, 2009). CROY, ANITA, ED. *Ancient Aztec and Maya* (Brown Bear, 2010). DALAL, ANITA, ED. *Ancient Egypt; Ancient Mesopotamia* (Brown Bear, 2009). FLETCHER, JOANN. *Exploring the Life, Myth, and Art of Ancient Egypt* (Rosen, 2010). GRANT, NEIL. *Ancient Egypt and Greece* (Zak, 2009). HAZEN, W.A. *Everyday Life: Ancient Times* (Good Year, 2006). HURDMAN, CHARLOTTE, AND OTHERS. *Life in the Ancient World* (Lorenz, 2008). LONG, C.J. *Ancient America* (Lucent, 2002). MCNEILL, W.H. *The Rise of the West* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001). MARTELL, HAZEL. *The Kingfisher Book of the Ancient World* (Kingfisher, 2006). MORRIS, NEIL. *Asian Civilizations; Mesopotamia and the Bible Lands* (Zak, 2009). NARDO, DON. *Ancient Egypt; Ancient India* (Lucent, 2007; 2008). NEMET-NEJAT, K.R. *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Hendrickson/Roundhouse, 2003). SHAUGHNESSY, E.L. *Exploring the Life, Myth, and Art of Ancient China* (Rosen, 2010).

Citation (MLA style):

"Ancient civilization." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 21 Jan. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

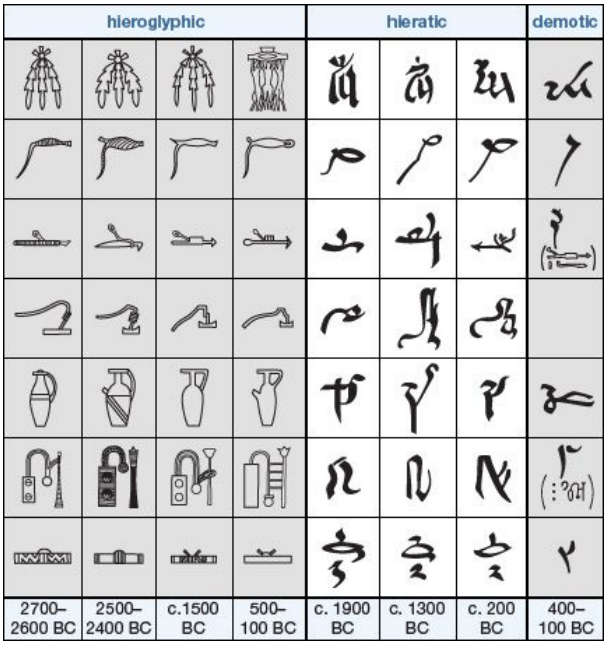
While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

ARTICLE

hieroglyphics

Ancient Egyptians had three different writing systems. The oldest, best known, and most difficult to read is called hieroglyphics. The word, which means “sacred carving,” was used by Greeks who saw the script on temple walls and public monuments. The Greeks were somewhat mistaken in their terminology because

hieroglyphs were used on gravestones, statues, coffins, vessels, implements, and for all sorts of nonreligious texts—songs, legal documents, and historical inscriptions.



The hieroglyphics and their hieratic and demotic equivalents give evidence of having evolved over several centuries. The symbols represent, top to bottom, three fox skins tied together, a whip, a harpoon, an adz, a stone jug, a scribe's outfit, and a roll of papyrus tied with a cord.

From G. Moller, Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins fur Buchwesen und Schrifttum, ii (1919), 78

Hieroglyphic writing has two main characteristics: objects are portrayed as ideograms or pictures, and the picture signs have the phonetic, or sound, value of the words represented by the objects. Thus hieroglyphs are not pictures only: they can be spoken, as are words written in an alphabet such as that of English. A written text normally contains three kinds of hieroglyphs: ideograms, which are read as the words they represent; phonograms, which are signs that do not refer to the objects they picture: they simply stand for one or more consonants; and determinatives, which have no phonetic value but help the reader to determine the correct meaning of the text.

Hieroglyphics were established as a writing system by at least 3100 BC. The system remained in use for about 3,500 years. The last known hieroglyphic inscription is dated AD 394. In the earliest period there were about 700 hieroglyphs. In this first stage of writing only the absolutely necessary symbols were invented. In the second stage of development easier readability was achieved by increasing the number of signs and by using determinatives. After the second stage, a period of about 2,000 years during which the system was essentially unaltered, the number of symbols increased to several thousand. (*See also* alphabet.)

The other two Egyptian writing systems are hieratic and demotic. These are cursive scripts. Like modern handwriting, they are flowing, and the letters of words are joined. Hieratic (from the Greek *hieratikos,* meaning “priestly”) got its name at a time when it was used only for religious texts. Everyday documents, especially government texts, were written in demotic (from the Greek word *dēmotikos,* meaning “for the people”).

Both of these writing forms are based on hieroglyphics. Hieratic script was, like hieroglyphics, in use from about 3100 BC. It was originally written in vertical columns and later in horizontal rows from right to left. After 660 BC demotic script replaced hieratic in most ordinary writing, but hieratic remained in use by priests for several more centuries.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Hieroglyphics were not deciphered until the early 19th century. This was made possible by the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 by members of Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt. This basalt stone, now in the British Museum, contains identical texts in hieroglyphics, demotic, and Greek. A French linguist and historian, Jean-François Champollion, succeeded in translating the Rosetta Stone in 1822.

Citation (MLA style):

"Hieroglyphics." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

ARTICLE

Library of Alexandria

The Library of Alexandria was a famous library in the ancient city of Alexandria, Egypt. It was founded and maintained by the long succession of the Ptolemies, a family that ruled ancient Egypt for almost 300 years (323 BC–AD 30). The library formed part of a famous research institute known as the Alexandrian Museum. The institute attracted such scholars as Greek mathematician Euclid and Greek scientist Eratosthenes. Though the library survived many centuries, it was burned during a civil war in 48 BC.**Did You Know?**The Alexandrian Museum is called the Mouseion (“shrine of the Muses”) in Greek. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology and religion, the Muses were a group of nine goddesses who were the patrons of the arts.



An illustration shows what the ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt may have looked like.

Fine Art Images/Heritage-Images/age fotostock

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Background

Demetrius of Phaleron initially organized the Library of Alexandria. He began his career as a politician of Athens, Greece. After his fall from power, he escaped to Egypt, where he became an adviser to King Ptolemy I Soter. Demetrius was familiar with the achievements of the library at Athens, so Ptolemy charged him with the task of founding the library and museum in Alexandria.**Did You Know?**No artifacts from the Library of Alexandria have survived. All the information that modern scholars have about the library or its contents come from ancient written accounts.

The main museum and library were located near the royal palace. Both the museum and the library were organized in faculties, or subjects. A president-priest was at the head, and the Egyptian king paid the salaries of the staff. The complex included lecture and banquet halls, meeting rooms, living quarters, and walking areas.

Ptolemy III established a smaller branch, or daughter library, about 235 BC. It held the surplus of books as the main library filled. The branch library was located south of the city in the newly built Serapeum, a temple dedicated to the worship of the god Serapis.

Contents

Ptolemy and Demetrius designed the Library of Alexandria to be international and hold all important writings. The library contained not only all the works of Greek literature but also translations of works from other languages into Greek. One of the translations was the Septuagint (a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible).**Did You Know?**Estimates of the total number of books kept in the Library of Alexandria vary. Ancient scholars provided figures ranging from more than 200,000 to 700,000.

The Greek poet and scholar Callimachus was in charge of putting together a bibliography (or catalog) of all the works in the library. A few fragments of the bibliography still exist. They show that he divided the works into such subjects as law, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, history, and natural science. This bibliography quickly became a model for future works of a similar nature.

The Library of Alexandria set up a number of editorial programs for the works. For example, one program divided the works into “books” as they are now known. (The works were written on scrolls of papyrus. Each book was probably equal to the standard length of a scroll.) Another program gradually introduced systems of punctuation and accents.

Destruction

For years, scholars have disagreed about how and when the Library of Alexandria was destroyed. Most authorities now believe that the Roman leader Julius Caesar burned it in 48 BC. At the time, a civil war was raging in Egypt between Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy XIII over the throne. Caesar sided with Cleopatra. The Ptolemaic forces soon attacked Caesar by land and sea in the harbor. He realized that his only chance to gain the advantage was to set fire to the enemy fleet. The fire then spread from the ships to the city, destroying the library. Some sources argue that the library partially survived this burning and was rebuilt. It then went through other episodes of destruction and rebuilding before being destroyed completely in the late 3rd century AD.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The branch library at the Serapeum survived much longer. In the 4th century AD, Christianity became widespread in Egypt. Christians objecting to paganism (the belief in multiple gods) destroyed the Serapeum, and thus the library, in AD 391.

Bibliotheca Alexandrina



Egypt's “new Library of Alexandria,” officially known as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, opened in the early 21st century. It contains a main library and several specialized libraries, including ones for children, young adults, and the blind, as well as museums and an information sciences research institute.

© Goddard_Photography/iStock.com

In 2002 the Egyptian government opened a new library patterned after the Library of Alexandria. Egypt built the library in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Called the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the library is located near the site of the ancient original. The circular building with glass ceilings has granite walls on the outside. Characters from many of the alphabets of the world are carved into the wall. The library features 11 levels, with several museums, a planetarium, and various meeting and research rooms. The shelves can hold some 8,000,000 books

Explore Further

Check out these articles for more information:libraryAlexandriaancient EgyptMusesSerapis

Learn about some of the people connected with the Library of Alexandria in these articles: EuclidEratosthenesCallimachusJulius Caesar

---

Citation (MLA style):

"Library of Alexandria." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Apr. 2024. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

ARTICLE

papyrus

The ancient Egyptians made a kind of paper from the stalks of a reed called papyrus, or paper plant. The plant's scientific name is *Cyperus papyrus* (family Cyperaceae). The paper made from the plant is also called papyrus.



Papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*).

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The ancient Egyptians used parts of the tall papyrus plant to make paper, household utensils, and boats.

© jimmyvillalta—iStock/Getty Images

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Papyrus is a grasslike aquatic plant that grows up to about 15 feet (4.6 meters) tall. It is found in quietly flowing water up to 3 feet (90 centimeters) deep. Its green, jointless, bluntly triangular stems bear long, sharp leaves. Radiating flower clusters bloom at the tip of each stem. The papyrus plant is now often used as an ornamental plant in water gardens in warm areas or in conservatories. The dwarf species, which only grows up to about 2 feet (60 centimeters) tall, is sometimes potted and grown indoors.



A section of an ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead includes painting and writing on papyrus. Such books were placed in tombs. They contained spells or magic formulas intended to protect and help the dead in the afterlife.

© francesco de marco/Shutterstock.com



A long papyrus manuscript has rolled ends. Several sheets were glued end to end to form a continuous roll of paper.

© Cla78/Dreamstime.com

The ancient Egyptians grew the papyrus plant in the Nile delta region. They used the stem of the plant to make sails, cloth, mats, and cords. They also made a paper from the pith, or inner portion, of the stalk. To do that, they cut the pith into thin strips. They then placed a number of the strips side by side, topping them with another set of strips placed at a right angle. The two layers formed a sheet, which the Egyptians dampened and pressed. Upon drying, the gluelike sap of the plant acted as an adhesive and cemented the layers together. Finally, the Egyptians hammered the sheet and dried it in the sun. The paper was pure white in color and, if well-made, was free of spots, stains, or other defects. The Egyptians subsequently joined a number of the sheets—usually no more than 20—together with paste to form a roll.

Paper made from papyrus was the chief writing material in ancient Egypt. The Greeks adopted it, and it was used extensively in the Roman Empire. People used it not only for the production of books (in roll or scroll form) but also for correspondence and legal documents.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The use of papyrus for writing material began to die out in Egypt after the 9th century AD. At that time the manufacture of paper from other plant fibers made papyrus unnecessary. By the 3rd century AD, papyrus had already begun to be replaced in Europe by the less-expensive parchment (made from processed animal skins). However, the use of papyrus for books and documents persisted on and off until about the 12th century.

Citation (MLA style):

"Papyrus." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 29 Apr. 2020. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

ARTICLE

Pyramids of Giza

The Pyramids of Giza (also spelled Gizeh) are three enormous pyramids in northern Egypt. They were built in the 4th dynasty, which lasted roughly from 2575 to 2465 BC, during the period in ancient Egypt known as the Old Kingdom. Paid laborers erected the pyramids on a rocky plateau on the west bank of the Nile River near Giza. The ancient Greeks named the Pyramids of Giza one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Those pyramids, as well as others in the vicinity, were collectively designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979.



The Pyramids of Giza are located in northern Egypt. They are part of a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



The Pyramids of Giza are located on the west bank of the Nile River near Giza, south of Cairo, in northern Egypt.

© Ron Gatepain



The Pyramids of Giza in Egypt remain one of the engineering marvels of all time.

© sculpies/stock.adobe.com

Background



The pyramid of Khufu, near Giza, Egypt, was built as a tomb for King Khufu. Also called the Great Pyramid, it is the largest of the three Pyramids of Giza. It is perhaps the largest single building ever constructed.

© Ron Gatepain

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



What's inside the ancient Egyptian pyramid of Khufu?

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Three Egyptian kings—Khufu (Cheops), his son Khafre (Chephren), and his grandson Menkaure (Mykerinus)—ordered the construction of three huge pyramids that would serve as their tombs. The northernmost and oldest pyramid of the group was built for Khufu, the second king of the 4th dynasty. Called the Great Pyramid, it is the largest of the three. The pyramid rests on a base that covers 13 acres (5.3 hectares), and each side of the base is about 755 feet (230 meters) long. Its original height was some 481 feet (147 meters).

The middle pyramid was built for Khafre, the fourth of the eight kings of the 4th dynasty. The structure measures about 707 feet (216 meters) on each side. It was originally 471 feet (143 meters) high.



The pyramid of Menkaure is the smallest of the Pyramids of Giza.

Dennis Jarvis (CC-BY-2.0)

The southernmost and last pyramid to be built was that of Menkaure, the fifth king of the 4th dynasty. Each side measures just over 356 feet (109 meters). The structure’s completed height was 218 feet (66 meters).

In ancient and medieval times, people plundered both the inside and outside of the pyramids. Thus, the grave goods—the items that the kings were thought to need in the afterworld—originally placed in the burial chambers are missing. In addition, the pyramids no longer reach their original heights because they have been almost entirely stripped of their outer layer of smooth white limestone. The Great Pyramid, for example, is now only about 451 feet (138 meters) high.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



A mortuary temple stands nearby the pyramid of Khafre.

© Ron Gatepain

Built near each pyramid is a mortuary temple. A stone causeway links it to a valley temple (pavilion) on the edge of the Nile floodplain. Also nearby are lesser pyramids used for the burials of the other members of the royal family. Surrounding the pyramids are extensive fields of mastabas. Mastabas are flat-topped burial structures. Relatives or officials of the kings were buried in them.

Great Pyramid

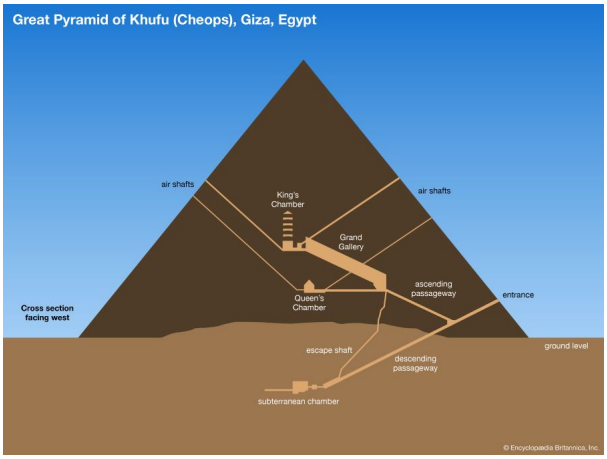


The pyramid of Khufu, called the Great Pyramid, is the largest and oldest of the three main pyramids in Giza, Egypt.

© boonsom/stock.adobe.com

Khufu’s pyramid is perhaps the most colossal single building ever constructed on the planet. Laborers cut approximately 2.3 million blocks of stone, each weighing about 2.5 tons. They then had to transport the stones a few miles to the location of the pyramid. In the early 21st century historians discovered an ancient papyrus in an Egyptian port city. They learned from the document that the laborers used boats to move the stone. The completed Great Pyramid weighs about 5.75 million tons.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



A cross section shows the interior of the Great Pyramid of Khufu, facing west, near Giza, Egypt.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Patrick O'Neill Riley

The entrance to the Great Pyramid is on the north side, about 59 feet (18 meters) above ground level. A sloping corridor descends from it through the pyramid's interior and ends in an unfinished underground chamber. An ascending passageway branches from the descending corridor. It leads to a room known as the Queen's Chamber and to a great slanting gallery that is 151 feet (46 meters) long. At the upper end of this gallery, a long and narrow passage gives access to the burial room, usually called the King's Chamber. This room is entirely lined with granite.

Building the Pyramids



Visitors enter the pyramid of Menkaure in Giza, Egypt. The reconstruction of the facing shows different construction phases. The stones above the entrance are in an early stage. The stones below the entrance show how the pyramid looked when complete.

© Ron Gatepain



Who built the Pyramids of Giza?

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The question of how the pyramids were built has not been satisfactorily answered. One theory is that the Egyptians built a sloping embankment of brick, earth, and sand around the pyramid. They increased the height and length of the embankment as the pyramid rose. The laborers then hauled stone blocks up the ramp by means of sledges, rollers, and levers. They probably wet the earth to make it easier to move the stone.

According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, it took 100,000 workers 20 years to build the Great Pyramid. The men were probably agricultural laborers. They worked on the pyramids only (or primarily) during the Nile's annual flooding, when they were unable to work in the fields. By the late 20th century, however, archaeologists found evidence that as few as 20,000 workers may have occupied the site. They probably worked on the pyramids year-round rather than for just a season. Support personnel, such as bakers, physicians, and priests, accompanied them.

Great Sphinx

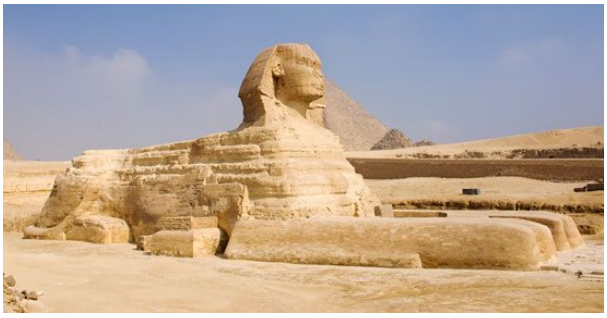


The Great Sphinx is located near the pyramid of Khafre.

© Ron Gatepain

To the south of the Great Pyramid near Khafre's valley temple lies the Great Sphinx. The sphinx is carved out of a single block of limestone. It has the facial features of a man wearing a royal headdress but the body of a resting lion. It is approximately 240 feet (73 meters) long and 66 feet (20 meters) high.

Most scholars date the Great Sphinx to the 4th dynasty and believe that Khafre commissioned it. However, some believe that Khafre's older brother built it to commemorate their father, Khufu. These theorists claim that the face of the Great Sphinx bears more resemblance to Khufu than Khafre. That observation also led to speculation that Khufu himself built the statue.



© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The Great Sphinx is made from limestone.

© vinzo/iStock.com

The Great Sphinx has greatly deteriorated over the years. Beginning in ancient times, various people have tried to preserve the statue. The body has suffered the most erosion. The face has also been damaged, and its nose is missing. According to some, Napoleon's troops shot off the nose with a cannon. However, illustrations that date before Napoleon reveal a noseless sphinx. Another theory states that a religious fanatic mutilated the statue in the 14th century to protest idolatry.

Citation (MLA style):

"Pyramids of Giza." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 30 Jan. 2024. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

ARTICLE

sphinx

A sphinx is a mythological creature with a human head and a lion's body. It was an important image in Egyptian and Greek art and legend. In ancient Egypt, where the idea originated, the sphinx's head was usually a portrait of the reigning pharaoh. From Egypt the idea of the sphinx spread throughout the Mediterranean region and eventually reached Greece. Some Mediterranean peoples gave the creature the head of a woman and wings on the lion's body. The ancient Greeks continued with those traditions. In later Greek literature, the sphinx was not an object of terror but was instead a beautiful, wise, and mysterious woman.



The Great Sphinx and the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops) rise from the desert at Giza, Egypt.

© Maksym Gorpenyuk/Shutterstock.com

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



Scientists attempt to settle the question of who built the Great Sphinx by matching its facial features to those of pharaohs.

Contunico © ZDF Studios GmbH, Mainz; Thumbnail © Prinadulyatham/Dreamstime.com



According to one explanation, the Great Sphinx of Giza, Egypt, was defaced in early Islamic times to stop people from worshipping it as an idol.

Contunico © ZDF Studios GmbH, Mainz; Thumbnail © Rasoul Ali/Dreamstime.com

The earliest and most famous example of the sphinx in art is the large Great Sphinx at Giza, Egypt. Laborers carved it out of limestone about 2500 BC. It stands near the Pyramids of Giza, gazing across the Nile River, to the east. The Great Sphinx is among the world's largest sculptures. It measures some 240 feet (73 meters) long and 66 feet (20 meters) high. The lion is lying on its stomach with its front legs stretched in front. The human head has a royal headdress. According to some estimates, it would have taken about three years for 100 workers—using stone hammers and copper chisels—to finish the statue.



Sphinxes line a path to the entrance of the Luxor temple complex in Luxor, Egypt.

Alastair Pidgen—iStock/Thinkstock

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



At the great temple of Amon in Karnak, some of the sphinxes have the head of a ram. The ram was one of Amon's forms. Smaller figures of pharaohs are carved under the rams' chins.

© Gelia/Fotolia

Another notable example in Egypt is the avenue of sphinxes that links the temples of Amon at Luxor and Karnak. The statues lie along a stone road. They were buried beneath a thick accumulation of debris before the area was excavated by archaeologists in the 1960s. More than a thousand sphinxes line the avenue, although some have been destroyed or damaged. Each is 10 feet (3 meters) long and 4 feet (1.2 meters) wide and stands on a base 5 feet (1.5 meters) high. Inscriptions carved in the bases describe festivals and burial ceremonies that took place along the road. The sphinxes were made between about 1200 and 400 BC.

The Greeks borrowed their idea of a sphinx from the Egyptians. The design first began showing up in the Greek world about 1600 BC. The Greek examples were not identical in appearance to their predecessors. For example, they generally wore a different headdress. After 1200 BC the depiction of sphinxes disappeared from Greek art for about 400 years. The later Greek sphinx was almost always female and usually wore a long-tiered wig. The body became graceful, and the wings developed a beautiful curving form. The Greeks decorated vases, ivories, and metal works with sphinxes. They also used them as ornaments on temples.



An image of Oedipus and the sphinx is painted on the interior of an Attic red-figured *kylix* (cup or drinking vessel), about 470 BC.

Album/Alamy

A story from Greek mythology tells of a winged sphinx terrorizing Thebes. The creature put a riddle to all those who passed and ate those who failed to guess it. She asked, “What animal walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs at night?” After many had died in that way, the hero Oedipus answered the

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

riddle correctly. (A person crawls on all fours as an infant, walks on two legs when grown, and leans on a cane in old age.) The sphinx then killed herself. By the 5th century illustrations of the encounter between Oedipus and the sphinx appeared on vase paintings. Artists usually portrayed that sphinx perched on a column.

Citation (MLA style):

"Sphinx." *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 15 Nov. 2018. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

IMAGE

gold mask of King Tut



A gold funerary mask of King Tutankhamen was discovered in his tomb at the Valley of the Kings in Thebes, Egypt. The mask is in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

© Photos.com/Jupiterimages/Thinkstock

Citation (MLA style):

Gold mask of King Tut. Image. *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

IMAGE

ancient Egyptian periods

Historians divide ancient Egypt into three periods: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. These are times when Egyptian civilization flourished. They are separated and followed by periods of decline.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski

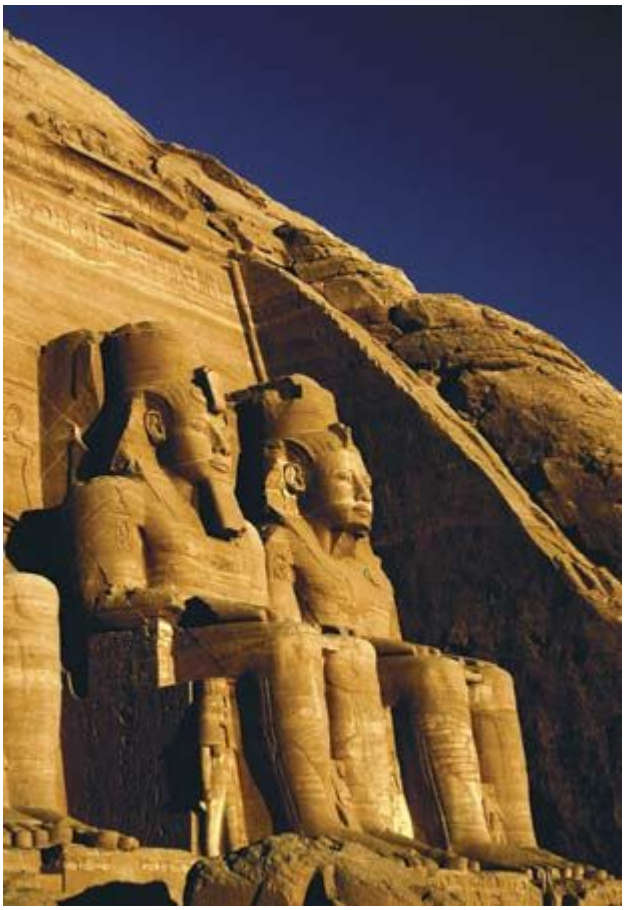
Citation (MLA style):

Ancient Egyptian periods. Image. *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

IMAGE

Abu Simbel: statues of Ramses II



Sandstone figures of Ramses II stand in front of the main temple at Abu Simbel, in southern Egypt.

Glen Allison/Getty Images

Citation (MLA style):

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Abu Simbel: statues of Ramses II. Image. *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

VIDEO

Karnak

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Video Transcript

NARRATOR: The village of Karnak is located a few kilometers north of Luxor on the eastern bank of the Nile. It's the site of the Karnak temple complex, Egypt's largest single gathering of temple ruins. Outstanding amongst the ruins is the Temple of Amun-Ra, ancient Egypt's most majestic sanctuary, built during the era of the Early Middle Kingdom some time after 2,100 B.C. A legendary portico - over 130 columns were built to bear the weight of the temple's wooden roof. The temple depicts an image of the world. The over 20-meter-high columns, support the sky represented by the roof. In Egyptian mythology, they are the connection between heaven and Earth, between the gods and earthly mortals. This is the guardian of the sanctuary, Achmuth Fehmi. He keeps a watchful eye to ensure that visitors do not damage the temple. Day in, day out he can be found in the ruins. But in all his time here, this place has never lost its fascination for him. On the contrary, he takes great pride in what his ancestors accomplished by hand, without any major technical assistance. ACHMUTH FEHMI: "Yes, when I see all the beauty here, my heart opens up and feels content. I see how beautiful my country is." NARRATOR: And he's not the only one. Innumerable tourists visit the Karnak Temple complex every day. Only after they have finished taking all their pictures do things quiet down again. To really get a sense of the mystery that the site holds, it is recommended to arrive early, around 6 a.m., or later in the day after 4 p.m. when most of the tourist coaches have left. During off-peak hours, Achmuth Fehmi has a little more time to show remaining visitors the spot where stones almost 4,000 years old speak to him. This is the only obelisk at Karnak that is still standing. You can see its mysterious hieroglyphs, symbols from another world. Egypt's rulers built the Karnak temple complex over the course of several centuries and today it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Ancient Egyptian temples and obelisks still stand at Karnak, Egypt.

Contunico © ZDF Studios GmbH, Mainz; Thumbnail © Adrian Martinez/Dreamstime.com

---

Citation (MLA style):

Karnak. Video. *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

VIDEO

ancient Egypt: monuments

Britannica Note:

The Great Pyramid of Khufu in Egypt was begun in about 2550 BC.



Video Transcript

NARRATOR: This map illustrates some of the most important sites associated with ancient Egypt. The area around the Nile delta holds several pyramids constructed during the major pyramid age. That period lasted from about 2600 BC to about 2325 BC. The pyramids were built as tombs for the kings and queens of Egypt. At Saqqarah is one of the earliest stone buildings of importance that has survived from ancient Egypt. It is an early form of a pyramid, but it was built in six stages. It is known as the Step Pyramid. It was built about 2600 BC. Further up the Nile at Dahshur stands an early attempt to build a true pyramid. The bottom part has steeper sides than the top part. Because of this, it is known as the Bent, Blunted, False, or Rhomboidal Pyramid. It was built by the first ruler of the 4th dynasty, which began about 2575 BC. The most famous of the true pyramids built by the ancient Egyptians lies at Giza. Of the three pyramids built there, the Great Pyramid is the oldest and the largest. Just south of the Great Pyramid rests the Great Sphinx. The sphinx has the facial features of a man but the body of a lion. Up the Nile from Giza is Thebes. Thebes was the capital of the ancient Egyptian empire at its height, from about 1500 BC to about 1075 BC. The area around Thebes--which includes Luxor, the Valley of the Kings, and Karnak--is host to many temples and shrines. Thebes and the Valley of the Kings also served as the burial site of almost all the pharaohs during this period. By then the kings and queens of ancient Egypt were no longer buried in pyramids. Instead, the tombs were cut into the ground. There are 62 known tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The only one that was not plundered, or robbed, was the tomb of Tutankhamen. Tutankhamen's tomb was discovered in 1922 and excavated. The wonderful treasures that were found there now reside in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. They show how rich the burial of a great pharaoh must have been. The southern part of Thebes developed around a site known today as the Temple of Luxor. King Amenhotep III, who ruled in the 1300s BC, had the temple built to honor Amon, king of the gods. An avenue of sphinxes connected the temple complex at Luxor to the Great Temple of Amon at Karnak. The most striking feature of the

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

temple is a huge hall with 134 columns. Abu Simbel was at the southern boundary of ancient Egypt. In the 1200s BC the pharaoh Ramses II ordered two temples cut from a cliffside there. Four colossal statues of Ramses himself adorn the main entrance to the Great Temple. The temple and the statues had to be removed from their original site in the 1960s. The nearby Aswan High Dam created a lake that threatened to cover the site.

Several pyramids and other buildings from ancient Egypt have survived to the present day. Many are located along the course of the Nile River.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Citation (MLA style):

Ancient Egypt: monuments. Video. *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

VIDEO

ancient Egypt

Video Transcript

NARRATOR: The Egyptians - a culture boasting extraordinary accomplishments was way ahead of its time. The Nile, a river which traces an over 120-mile path through the desert, provided the foundation for their civilization. The river brought fertility to the land, and peace lasting millennia helped it flourish. Ancient Egypt was impressive; even in antiquity its architecture and monumental structures left visitors breathless. Contemporary

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

accounts report how advanced the Egyptians were in sciences and technology. Archaeological excavations confirm that Egypt was the birthplace of our civilization. Abydos is the site of the Egyptians' first sacred ground. Archaeologists have dated a potsherd with an inscription from King Scorpion to 3200 B.C., making it quite possibly the oldest scripted tableau in human history. For the Egyptians this was a groundbreaking cultural achievement which greatly contributed to the development of the empire. KENT WEEKS: The development of writing in Ancient Egypt made possible the development of Egyptian civilization in its most complex forms. Without writing, there could have been no record keeping. NARRATOR: Ancient Egypt was the first culture to document its existence, preserving its story for posterity. Mysterious symbols which had long been forgotten. It was not until 200 years ago that researchers managed to unlock the hidden meanings of the hieroglyphs. Many historical records tell of the pyramids. Archaeologists are still at a loss when it comes to explaining how it was possible to assemble millions of stone blocks to construct the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Seventh Wonder of the World. It's thought that the Egyptians employed ramps to build them. How exactly the pyramids were erected will forever remain a mystery. What is certain is that it took a concerted effort on the part of all Egyptians. The pharaoh and his pyramids were the focus of all social life in Ancient Egypt. The Egyptian people aided and venerated the king, laboring to realize his construction projects. In return the pharaoh guaranteed his people a stable and orderly community life. It was thus that the pyramids gained political meaning. They helped ensure power and stability for the pharaohs. A model of leadership that succeeded: the Egyptian Empire was a picture of stability which remained invulnerable for thousands of years.

Two of ancient Egypt's greatest achievements were hieroglyphic writing and the pyramids.

Contunico © ZDF Studios GmbH, Mainz; Thumbnail © Mikhail Kokhanchikov/Dreamstime.com

---

Citation (MLA style):

Ancient Egypt. Video. *Britannica LaunchPacks: Ancient Egypt: Achievements*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 3 May. 2025.

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

© 2020 Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.