

# Ancient Egypt, Part One: Early Egypt to the Old Kingdom

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The Sphinx of Giza at the Giza Necropolis, Egypt. Photo by: DeAgostini/Getty Images

## *The first in a two-part series*

For almost 30 centuries, ancient Egypt was the leading civilization in the Mediterranean world. From the great pyramids of the Old Kingdom through the military conquests of the New Kingdom, Egypt has entranced archaeologists and historians. It even has its own field of study, Egyptology.

We learn about ancient Egypt from the monuments, objects and artifacts found at archaeological sites, covered with hieroglyphs that have only recently been deciphered. These pieces of history show a culture rich in art, architecture and religious traditions.

## **Predynastic Period (5000-3100 B.C.)**

Few written records or artifacts have been found from the period before dynasties, or family lines that ruled Egypt. The period included at least 2,000 years of development of the Egyptian civilization.

Late Stone Age communities in northeastern Africa exchanged hunting for agriculture. The change allowed the development of Egyptian arts and crafts, technology, politics and religion.

Around 3400 B.C., two kingdoms were established: the Red Kingdom to the north and the White Kingdom in the south. A southern king, Scorpion, made the first attempts to conquer the northern kingdom around 3200 B.C. A century later, King Menes subdued the north and united the country, becoming the first king of the first dynasty.

### **Archaic (Early Dynastic) Period (3100-2686 B.C.)**

King Menes founded the capital of ancient Egypt at what would become Memphis, in the north. The period saw the development of the foundations of Egyptian society, including the ideology of kingship. To the Egyptians, the king was a godlike being, closely identified with the all-powerful god Horus. The earliest known hieroglyphic writing also dates to this time.

Most ancient Egyptians were farmers living in villages, and agriculture formed the economic base of Egypt. The annual flooding of the great Nile River provided irrigation and fertilization. Farmers each year sowed the wheat after the water receded and harvested it before the high temperatures and drought returned.

### **Old Kingdom: Age of the pyramid builders (2686-2181 B.C.)**

The Old Kingdom began with the third dynasty of pharaohs, or kings. Around 2630 B.C., King Djoser asked Imhotep, an architect and priest, to design a monument for him. The result was the world's first major stone building, the Step-Pyramid near Memphis. Pyramid-building reached its peak with the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza, outside Cairo. Built for Khufu, who ruled from 2589 to 2566 B.C., the pyramid was later named as one of the ancient world's Seven Wonders. Two other pyramids were built at Giza for later leaders.

During the third and fourth dynasties, Egypt enjoyed a time of peace and wealth. The pharaohs held absolute power and provided a stable government. Foreign military campaigns in Nubia (present-day Sudan and southern Egypt) and Libya added to the wealth.

Over the fifth and sixth dynasties, the kings' wealth was depleted, partially due to the expense of pyramid-building. Their power faltered with the growing influence of the nobility and the priesthood for the sun god Ra, or Re.

After the death of King Pepy II, who ruled for some 94 years, the period ended in chaos.

**Quiz**

- 1 Which section of the article highlights the idea that society changed when people started to grow their food?
- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-2]
  - (B) "Predynastic Period (5000-3100 B.C.)"
  - (C) "Archaic (Early Dynastic) Period (3100-2686 B.C.)"
  - (D) "Old Kingdom: Age of the pyramid builders (2686-2181 B.C.)"
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Old Kingdom: Age of the pyramid builders (2686-2181 B.C.)" that explains the decline of the dynasties in ancient Egypt.
- 3 Why does the author include information about Egyptology in the first paragraph of the article?
- (A) to show that ancient Egypt is such a complex period to study that it is its own subject
  - (B) to show that Egyptology is the most important form of archaeology
  - (C) to show that studying ancient Egypt requires people who know how to read hieroglyphs
  - (D) to show that ancient Egypt was the most important culture in the Mediterranean world
- 4 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-2].
- What purpose does the introduction serve in developing the MAIN idea of the article?
- (A) It provides a list of historical events that happen before the events in the rest of the article.
  - (B) It lays out general pieces of information that prepare the reader for the rest of the article.
  - (C) It explains why dynasties are important in the history of ancient Egypt.
  - (D) It presents details that prepare the reader for the general ideas in the rest of the article.