

2 Egypt

Far to the West of Mesopotamia, in North-eastern Africa, was Egypt, another great centre of early culture, equally vital, centred on the Nile which by its annual floods gave life to what would otherwise be desert, floods caused by the seasonal rains of tropical Africa. Since the Nile flows from South to North, it is only logical that Upper Egypt lies to the South, Lower Egypt to the North! The Nile flows into the Mediterranean in a huge Delta, the most fertile part and the cultural centre. Since the Nile Valley alone is irrigated, it forms a narrow fertile strip running through barren desert. The world-famous pyramids stand at Gizeh, near present-day Cairo, just where the Nile spreads into the delta. The Nile was vital, not only for water but also for transportation. Every year, the Nile overflowed its banks and covered the fields with a layer of fertile mud.

Egyptian History

Before 3000 B.C. the warrior king Menes united upper and lower Egypt and established the First Dynasty. In 2700 B.C. King Djoser founded the Third Dynasty, thereby beginning the period of the Old Kingdom, which lasts until 2200. He also built the Step Pyramid of Djoser, the first known pyramid in Egypt. During the Old Kingdom, the power of the pharaoh was absolute. By 2772 B.C. the Egyptians already had a solar calendar of 365 days and when the 4th dynasty Pharaoh Khufu, also known as Cheops died in 2560, he was buried in the Great Pyramid at Gizeh, the construction of which remains an amazing exploit. Soon after this, the famous Sphinx was built nearby.

Menes conquered the Delta using copper arrow-heads, but by 2500 the Sumerians had discovered that if you add 10% of tin to soft copper, the result is the very hard bronze with which it became possible to make real swords. The spread of the use of bronze indicates the passage from Stone Age (Neolithic) to Bronze Age, a transition that seems to happen in Western Europe and China at about the same time, independently.

Since tin is rarer than copper, it was necessary to mine it and import it, international trade and banking had begun. At about this time too, cities began to build protective walls, and the number of weapons grew, humanity had discovered war. The citadel of Troy was probably founded around 2500 to protect the ships passing through the Dardanelles carrying tin.

Egypt developed very early a remarkable monumental culture familiar to everyone. Yet it remained largely isolated by the desert from other developed cultures, while the Egyptian cult of the dead has no parallel elsewhere. The system of writing in pictograms known as hieroglyphics was established at the beginning of the Old Kingdom and remained unchanged until the end of Egyptian culture during the Roman Empire.

The Old Kingdom collapsed in part because the construction of pyramids and the entire cult of the dead demanded too much from the country's population. It was followed by the Middle Kingdom in 2050. This social system collapsed in about 1750 because of power-conflicts between pharaohs and nobility and the Hyksos from Canaan and Syria took control of Egypt until they were expelled in 1560 and the New Kingdom was established, lasting until 1087.

In 1375 B.C. Amenhotep IV (Akhenaton), concerned about abuses in the Osiris cult of Egypt, proposed a new monotheistic religion, perhaps the first in world history, dedicated to the worship of the sun. He moved the capital of Egypt from Thebes to El-Amarna. The new religion did not last long; the cult of Akhenaton was abolished under the reign of his successor, the Pharaoh Tutankhamen (1352-1344), who moved the capital back to Thebes and returned to the old religion. Akhenaton's beautiful wife, Nefertiti, achieved her own position in world history thanks to her famous portrait bust with the elongated neck. These few years are above all noted for the elegant and sensuous quality of the art works they produced. The tomb of Tutankhamen, discovered and excavated during the 1920s, provided a large number of objects testifying to the sophistication of the art produced at this period.

Rameses II 'the Great' (1304-1237) built a new capital at the Nile Delta, and reaffirmed Egyptian power. In 1182 his successor, Rameses III drove the 'Sea People' out of Egypt; they went to the coasts of Canaan and became the Philistines against whom David waged major campaigns. Rameses III was the last great Egyptian Pharaoh. In 750 B.C., the negroid inhabitants of Kush to the south invaded Egypt and took power without destroying the main culture; in 671, the Assyrians conquered

Egypt in turn but within ten years their empire collapsed and Egypt regained its independence.

In 525 B.C. Cambyses, the son of the great Persian king Cyrus, took control of a much diminished Egypt; from about 343 B.C. the Persians ruled Egypt for a second time but in 332 - 331, Alexander the Great occupied Egypt and founded the city of Alexandria, where he was finally buried. His secretary, known as Ptolemy, founded a Hellenistic dynasty bearing his name in 305 and that family continued to rule Egypt until 31 B.C. when the last queen, Cleopatra, killed herself after the Battle of Actium. For almost 3000 years the culture of Egypt continued with little evolution; yet there is nothing significant to report in philosophy or literature. Almost all the land's energy and wealth went into the cult of the dead.