Introduction

Though the civilization of the ancient Egyptians was arguably not the earliest to flourish, it endured longer than any other, and in its heyday it was the most spectacular on earth. It emerged about 5,000 years ago and continued to flourish for three millennia. Much of the information about this remarkable country, and the people who lived there so long ago, has lain hidden in the sands for thousands of years. Their secrets are being gradually unearthed.

It was in the fertile areas around the great rivers of the Near East and North Africa that agriculture began, and with it came the beginnings of a settled, civilized way of life which proceeded to yield rich cultural fruits. The earliest evidence of settled farming communities beside the Nile dates from c.5500 BC. These grew into a number of chiefdoms, with distinctive regional cultures, in Upper and Lower Egypt. In Upper Egypt, social stratification and craftsmanship began to evolve and the cultural developments of the south gradually penetrated Lower Egypt to the north during the Predynastic and Protodynastic Periods, leading up to the country's political consolidation as a single state in c.3100.

Egyptian religion

When Egypt was unified under a succession of pharaohs, many local gods were admitted into the national pantheon, giving rise to a vast number of deities and a complex system of beliefs and ritual. Religion was a fundamental part of the life of every Egyptian, from the mighty pharaoh down to the most humble agricultural worker, and the annual flooding of the Nile inspired many of the myths and beliefs of ancient Egypt. The people recognized their utter dependence on the revival of their agricultural land: The arid desert in which the people of Egypt were buried also shaped their identity and inspired their religious beliefs. For us, their religion is one of the most intriguing aspects of the ancient Egyptians' culture - a wealth of gods and temples, mummies, ornate tombs and fabulous treasure. Centuries of plunder by grave robbers, followed by more systematic excavations by archaeologists, have revealed an incredible quantity of artefacts, buildings, imagery and writing that provide a fascinating account of the beliefs and practices of these ancient people. The wealth of documentary information left in the form of carved inscriptions and inscribed papyrus rolls provides us with an insight into all aspects of their religion and ritual.

A vast number of graves and tombs have been excavated. They reveal that the ancient Egyptians aspired to an Afterlife that was pretty much a continuation of their existence on earth (only more fruitful and prosperous), preserving their social status, family connections and even their physical possessions. They thought of their deities, too, as leading lives very much like their own. Their tombs and temples are therefore rich in decoration, inscriptions and artefacts that offer a detailed and vibrant account of every aspect of life in ancient Egypt.
Timeline of Ancient Egypt

Before c.5500 BC
Ugly settlers in the Nile Valley;
ingina of crop farming, growing
wheat and barley.

5500–c.3100 BC
Early Dynastic and Protodynastic Period
Development of craftsmanship and
imperial husbandry.

3100–c.2686 BC
Early Dynastic Period
Development of hieroglyphs.

2686–2181 BC
Old Kingdom

2181–c.2055 BC
First Intermediate Period

Heracleopolitan and Theban
dynasties control Egypt.

2055–c.1650 BC
Middle Kingdom

Egypt conquers Nubia, trades
with Syria and Palestine.

Mudbrick pyramids built
in Middle Egypt and at
Dahshur.

Rock-cut tombs
constructed in Middle
Egypt.

1650–c.1550 BC
Second Intermediate Period

The horse is introduced into Egypt.

Hyksos claim control in Delta.

1550–c.1069 BC
New Kingdom

Royal tombs built in the Valley of the
Kings.

c.1348 BC
Akhenaten introduces worship of Aten,
the sun disc, in place of established
religion, and establishes a new capital
Akhetaten.

1069–c.747 BC
Third Intermediate Period

Egypt politically divided.

747–c.332 BC
Late Period

671 BC
Assyrians invade Egypt and reach
Memphis.

525 BC
Egypt becomes part of the Persian
Empire.

332 BC–AD 395
Ptolemaic and Roman Periods

AD 332
Egypt invaded by Alexander the Great,
bringing it under Macedonian Greek
rule. Alexandria founded.

305 BC
Ptolemy assumes power after death of
Alexander.

30 BC
Egypt becomes part of the Roman
Empire.

AD 324
Egypt adopts Christianity.

AD 395
End of Roman rule in Egypt.
The Land of Egypt

Ancient Egypt existed in a landscape of extremes, with vast expanses of arid desert bordering a narrow ribbon of wonderfully fertile land — and very little has changed to this day.

The Nile is Egypt's lifeblood. North of Aswan it flows for 900km (560 miles) through the Nile Valley until it reaches the Delta, which it traverses in a number of branches (five during the pharaonic period) before feeding its muddy water into the Mediterranean Sea. The silt it deposits is thick and black, inspiring the ancient Egyptians' name for their country, Kemet ('Black Land'). In contrast, the barren desert cliffs were seen to glow pink at dawn, so the desert was described as Deshret ('Red Land').

In ancient times, the Egyptian name for the summer season was Akhet, or Inundation. It was equivalent to the four months from July to October, when the great river overflowed its banks and flooded the Nile Valley and the Delta. The huge volumes of water originated as rain that fell in central Sudan, raising the level of the White Nile. A few weeks later the summer monsoon rain falling over the Ethiopian highlands caused a very rapid swelling of the Blue Nile, and its tributary, the Atbara. All of these sources of water combined, reaching Egypt in a great swollen rush at the end of July.

Only in 1968 were the waters of the River Nile finally tamed, by the construction of the Aswan Dam. The Nile Valley is no longer flooded every year, and this has made a huge difference to Egypt's natural environment and way of life.

As well as providing ancient Egypt with, usually, two healthy harvests a year, the Nile was the principal means of transportation. It supplied much of the protein in the people's diet (in the form of fish and water-birds). Ivory came from the tusks of the hippopotami that lived in the river, and papyrus was made from reeds that grew along its banks. Finally, the river was the source of mud, the chief ingredient of the most widely used building material - mudbricks. At the same time, the river could be treacherous: hippopotami, crocodiles, winds, currents, shallow waters and cataracts were all hazards that had to be taken seriously by the people whose lives depended on the Nile.

For most of the length of the Nile Valley, strips of fertile land border either side of the river, and the dividing line between desert and cultivation is clear-cut, as here at Tell el-Amarna.

Scenes of agricultural life were commonly painted on the walls of private tombs. Here in their Theban tomb Sennefer and his wife harvest their bountiful crop. c. 1300 BC.
The impregnable desert

The river was not the only place where danger lurked. The ancient Egyptians also particularly feared the desert. It was a place of searing heat by day and freezing cold by night, a waterless place of wild animals, fugitives and nomads. The desert dwellers often turned out to be marauders, and in addition there were countless demons who were supposed to live in the desert.

On the other hand, much of the greatness of the Egyptian civilization came from wealth yielded by the inhospitable desert. Its treasures included amethyst, turquoise, copper, limestone, sandstone, granite and above all—gold. The desert lands also fulfilled another important function: they helped to make Egypt into an almost impregnable fortress. To either side of the Nile were the wastelands of the Eastern and Western, or Libyan, Deserts, to the north the Mediterranean Sea, and in the south was the first cataract of the Nile, which made the river unnavigable at that point. Egypt was protected from almost any outside threat. This resulted in an exceptionally stable society, and a strong sense of national identity flourished. A fear of the unknown resulted in a common mistrust of outsiders or foreigners (who were often described as hesy, meaning ‘vile’ or ‘wretched’).

Harnessing nature

The ancient Egyptians were self-sufficient in most things, except for suitable timber for building. The agricultural cycle revolved around the Nile flood, which could usually be depended on. Measuring gauges known as Nilometers were used to record the flood levels, so that suitable precautions might be taken if necessary. Efficient irrigation was crucial to agriculture. Farmers practised basin irrigation: they built earth banks to divide up areas of the flood plain, then led water into these artificial ponds and allowed it to stand before draining it off. The system could be administered on a local level.

The major crops were emmer wheat, barley and flax. Tomb scenes and models illustrate the various stages: ploughing, sowing the seed, harvesting, winnowing, threshing, and so on. Also depicted are the production of food and drink, such as grape-picking, wine pressing, brewing, and breadmaking.

The dual benefits of the Nile and the sun made the land of Egypt a flourishing place. But as with all natural elements, there had to be precautions against their dangerous aspects. As protection against the overwhelming heat of the sun, people had to wear headcoverings to guard against sunstroke, and protected their eyes by wearing green malachite (copper) or black galena (lead) eye paints. Rain is not usually associated with Egypt, but it did occur in the north and sometimes caused floods in desert wadis; such problems had to be coped with. It therefore becomes clear that the lives of the ancient Egyptians were very much dictated by their natural environment and the climate.
Ancient Egypt as people usually imagine it – as the land of the pharaohs, with great temples, cities and burial sites, beautiful art and writing in hieroglyphs – came into being with the formation of a unified and centralized state in c.3100 BC. The factors that led to this development are speculative, but the most momentous changes in Egypt's history took place around 3000 BC.

For the first few hundred-thousand years of human occupation, Egypt was home to stone-age, or palaeolithic, hunting, fishing and food-gathering communities, which lived along the river terraces of the Nile Valley. Then, from c.5500 BC, the earliest agricultural communities emerged. Over the next 2,400 years, the country came to be divided between separate, self-governing communities, which developed at different rates socially, economically, politically and culturally. These early developments can be traced mainly by examining the so-called Predynastic burials, which have been excavated at various sites throughout Egypt.

Material culture
As the local cultures developed, their craftsmanship increased in quality and sophistication. Pottery was painted and jewellery fashioned; stone-working became more elaborate, with the manufacture of palettes, mace heads, knives and vases; metal-working began with the production of copper tools; and the copper ore malachite was used in the glaze for beads.

A recognizably Egyptian style was already beginning to emerge in the items being produced, and the markets for such goods clearly became wider and more specialized. Desert resources, such as gold from the Eastern Desert, were exploited and we know contact was made with traders from outside Egypt, as lapis lazuli from Badakhshan in north-eastern Afghanistan has been found in Predynastic graves.

The evidence of such artefacts indicates that their makers would have been freed from subsistence farming and that society was becoming differentiated, with the emergence of an elite who could afford luxury goods and who presumably controlled the trade routes, local irrigation systems and more elaborate building projects (especially tombs). Luxury goods may have been specially made to place in graves with the dead, and it seems that funerary customs played a major part in the increasing division of labour and the development of greater social complexity and stratification.

The exchange of goods would inevitably have been coupled with the exchange of ideas. The contact with Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) appeared...
early period of Egyptian civilization. It is likely that foreign traders would have been attracted to Egypt by the prospect of purchasing its gold.

A centralized state emerges
By c.3100 BC, Egypt was a highly efficient political state, with an administrative bureaucracy, precisely defined boundaries and elaborate kingship rites relating to a single ruler. So why did the Egyptian state emerge when it did? There have been a number of theories, reflecting various trends in thought. They relate to changes in the physical environment and climate, as well as external stimuli. It is most likely that a variety of factors coincided to create the major changes.

Environmental changes are likely to have been tied in with a growth in the population, increased production, and the freeing of specialists from subsistence farming, resulting in the domination of the poor by an elite. It has been suggested that the growth in population caused the need for increased technology to meet the rising demand, which in turn resulted in the need for central organization. Other theories involve population growth leading to conflict between communities. The increasing aridity of the desert over the millennia would have led to the narrowing of the area of habitable land, thus concentrating the population, and Egypt is known to have experienced a wetter period followed by a drier period around 3300 BC. The movement of people because of climatic changes (especially northwards into the Delta region) may well have caused both alliances and conflicts, resulting in the emergence of chiefdoms. Territorial competition and the merger of local chiefdoms no doubt led to increased power in the hands of fewer people.

Outside influences
Cultural transfer, especially from Mesopotamia and Elam, is often considered to have been the catalyst for Egypt's formation as a unified state, and the simultaneous emergence of a highly developed system of writing (hieroglyphs). But the direction and impact of any contact is still highly contested. Egypt's political superstructure was very likely well under way by the time Western Astarte motifs started to appear in Egyptian art. Examples show that the Egyptians may use of foreign ideas in a very Egyptian manner and soon chose to discard them.

While the development of writing helped to consolidate the unification of the state - aiding administrative efficiency and speeding up the process of centralization of power - there is no evidence that Egyptian hieroglyphs had their origins in a foreign writing system. The beginnings of Egyptian civilization often referred to as the Unification of Egypt, remain hazy and speculative.