Pyramids of Power

EGYPT'S MIDDLE KINGDOM

The majesty of Egypt lay not in the scope of its conquests, but rather in the remarkable stability of its kingdom. Pharaohs reigned as god-kings, and despite the demands rulers placed on their soldiers and builders, rebellions were rare. One dynasty succeeded another with few radical changes. A society deeply concerned with achieving immortality, Egypt came as close as any ancient kingdom to reigning for an eternity.

THE TWO LANDS
In the beginning, Egypt was not one country, but two: Lower Egypt, composed of the marshy Nile Delta, and Upper Egypt, a desert land—except for a fertile floodplain along the Nile. About 3100 B.C., King Narmer from Upper Egypt conquered the delta and became Lord of the Two Lands, which spread from the Mediterranean some 500 miles south to the First Cataract of the Nile.

THE OLD KINGDOM
Around 2700 B.C., Egypt moved beyond its formative phase and entered a golden age called the Old Kingdom. Though not technically an empire at this

Pyramid at Maidum This massive Old Kingdom step-pyramid contains the burial chamber of the pharaoh Sneferu.

| ca 3100 B.C. Egypt unified by Narmer. |
| ca 2550 B.C. Khufu of 4th dynasty erects Great Pyramid at Giza. |
| ca 2050 B.C. Mentuhotep II of Thebes reunites Egypt, inaugurating Middle Kingdom. |
| ca 2600 B.C. Djoser of Egypt's 3rd dynasty buried in Step Pyramid at Saqqara. |
| ca 2150 B.C. Old Kingdom collapses and Egypt fractures. |
| ca 1650 B.C. Hyksos Invasion brings Middle Kingdom to an end. |
point, Egypt's rulers had established the concept of divine kingship and staked their claim to immortality by erecting massive tombs to hold their mumified remains. The Great Pyramid of Pharaoh Khufu—erected about 2550 B.C. at Giza—is a veritable ladder to the sky for his spirit to ascend to heaven.

The Egyptian workers who built these pyramids were conscripts, not slaves. The burden placed on the kingdom by these colossal projects could not be sustained, however. Later kings were buried in smaller pyramids. Egyptian nobles, meanwhile, acquired wealth and erected impressive tombs of their own. The Old Kingdom collapsed about 2150 B.C. Persistent drought may have caused famine and unrest. Local rulers vied with each other for supremacy until King Mentuhotep II of Thebes reunited Egypt by force around 2050 B.C.

THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

Egypt emerged as an imperial power under Mentuhotep II and his successors, who sent troops south into Nubia to obtain gold, ivory, ebony, and other treasures. They established a military presence there by building fortresses near the Second Cataract of the Nile. Later pharaohs brought most of Nubia under Egypt's control. Some Nubians were enslaved; others remained free, serving as soldiers or local officials. Eventually, Nubians would emerge from Egypt's shadow and build their own pyramids.

Around 1650 B.C., intruders of Asiatic origin known as the Hyksos occupied Lower Egypt. King Avaris, established their capital at Avaris, and demanded tribute from Upper Egypt. The Hyksos introduced chariots and bronze weapons, which the Egyptians adopted and ultimately used to defeat the Hyksos. Kamose of Thebes launched that campaign, but he died before completing the mission, leaving as heir his young relative Ahmose, who, with the help of his mother Ahhotep, expelled the Hyksos around 1550 B.C. This triumph marked the dawn of the New Kingdom.

First pharaoh Narmer, the unifier of Egypt, is depicted on this stone tablet next to the falcon god Horus.

Imhotep

Imhotep, who served as vizier (chief counselor) to King Djoser of Egypt's 3rd dynasty, was a man of many talents. Trained as a scribe, he won renown as a scholar, priest, and physician. He is best remembered, however, as the architect of Djoser's magnificent tomb—the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, completed around 2600 B.C.

Architect Imhotep

Earlier royal tombs, called mastabas, had been low structures made of mud brick. Imhotep designed a stone structure with six levels, each narrower than the one below. As one inscription described the building, it was a staircase for the king, so that his spirit "may mount up to heaven thereby." Later Egyptian architects refined Imhotep's design by creating pyramids with smooth sides. So great was Imhotep's reputation as a physician and wonder-worker that he was deified in later times and worshiped at temples—an extraordinary honor for an Egyptian not of royal blood.
"Speak the truth; do the truth: for it is great, it is mighty, it is everlasting. It will obtain for you merit, and will lead you to veneration."

—THE TALE OF THE ELOQUENT PEASANT, CA 1800 B.C.
A Woman to Rule Them

EGYPT'S NEW KINGDOM

Rulers of the New Kingdom claimed descent from Egypt's supreme deity, Amun, the patron god of Thebes, whose cult incorporated that of Re, favored during the Old Kingdom. At the temple complex at Karnak and at temples near royal tombs, hewn out of cliffs across the Nile, priests made offerings to Amun (also referred to as Amun-Re) and the rulers devoted to him. Unlike the pyramids, these tombs were hidden in an attempt to prevent grave robbers from pillaging the treasures deposited there to afford rulers a luxurious afterlife.

LORDS OF WAR
About 1457 B.C., King Thutmose III campaigned against rebels in Palestine and Syria. His grandfather, Thutmose I, had swept through these lands and forced them to pay tribute. Declaring his faith in Amun, Thutmose III besieged the city of Megiddo in Palestine. The rebel leaders crawled on their bellies in supplication before the pharaoh, who they believed demonstrated the power of his father Amun "over all foreign lands." He went on to humble the king of Mitanni by driving his forces from Syria—but the Egyptians still had to reckon with the formidable Hittites. The long struggle between

Unwrapped Ramses II, embalmed for the afterlife like other New Kingdom pharaohs, has survived the ages as a mummy.

| 1479 B.C. | Queen Hatshepsut becomes regent for King Thutmose III and later clings to power. |
| 1457 B.C. | Thutmose III, now ruler in his own right, secures Palestine and Syria for Egypt. |
| 1275 B.C. | Ramses II leads Egyptian forces against Hittites in great chariot battle at Kadesh. |
| 1070 B.C. | New Kingdom breaks apart. |
| 667 B.C. | Assyrians invade Egypt, ending Nubian rule. |
| 1350 B.C. | Amenhotep IV, renamed Akhenaten, devotes himself exclusively to god Aton. |
| 1156 B.C. | Ramses III dies, marking beginning of the end for New Kingdom. |
| 750 B.C. | Nubians from kingdom of Kush take control of Egypt. |
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Unwrapped Ramses II, embalmed for the afterlife like other New Kingdom pharaohs, has survived the ages as a mummy.
"Lo, the god knows me well, Amun, Lord of Thrones-of-the-Two-Lands; He made me rule Black Land and Red Land as reward, No one rebels against me in all lands. All foreign lands are my subjects."

-INSRIPTION OF QUEEN HATSEPSUT AT KARNAK

the two powers culminated around 1275 B.C., when Egyptian troops led by Ramses II met the Hittites in the Battle of Kadesh, in Syria. Ramses then withdrew from Syria, subdued by the offer of a Hittite princess for his harem.

The exception among women, King Thutmose I's daughter, Hatshepsut, became regent for the underage heir, the future Thutmose III. She defied tradition by retaining her power even after her ward came of age, declaring herself pharaoh. She sent expeditions to the land of Punt, on the Red Sea, which returned laden with treasures and exotic animals. Two decades after she became regent, Thutmose III, now about 30, took power and followed in his grandfather's footsteps. But threats from abroad and treachery at home continued to plague the New Kingdom until it collapsed around 1070 B.C.

Timeless chores Women wash clothing in the Nile River in this romantic French painting, as they did in ancient times.

the rosetta stone

Ancient Egyptian inscriptions mystified modern historians until the Rosetta Stone was discovered in 1799 during Napoleon's Invasion of Egypt and deciphered two decades later. The stone—inscribed in 196 B.C. during the reign of King Ptolemy V of Egypt—contained the same text in Greek (the official language of the Ptolemaic dynasty), hieroglyphs (the first Egyptian script), and demotic (a cursive Egyptian script derived from hieroglyphs). English Egyptologist Thomas Young achieved a breakthrough by identifying Ptolemy's name as a cartouche (a set of hieroglyphs contained within an oval) at several places in the text. French linguist Jean-François Champollion later expanded on Young's work and cracked the code by determining that some hieroglyphs represent objects or concepts whereas others are phonetic, representing syllables in the spoken language.

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Egypt's New Kingdom

Mediterranean Sea

An exception, Pharaoh Akhenaten made his capital at Akhetaten to worship only a single god, a deity inhabiting the solar disk, called the Aten.

More than 60 tombs for pharaohs and nobles of the New Kingdom are cut deep into the rock of the Valley of the Kings.

A decisive battle at Kadesh between the Hittites and Ramses II ended in a draw, with Ramses withdrawing his troops at the promise of a princess for his harem.