

Unit 8: Ancient Egypt

Ancient Civilizations option

3150BCE – 30BCE

Period Overview

The timeline of Ancient Egyptian studies runs over a lengthy period of time, usually focussing on the period from the late part of the fourth millennium BCE - and the unification of upper and lower Egypt - up until the domination of the Roman empire some 3000 years later. Within that timeframe, the history of the lands is usually broken into three kingdoms: Old, Middle and New. During these three kingdoms, the lands were ruled by a sequence of pharaohs, including several of whom we know a great deal about. The use of pyramids and other tombs as burial places means that we have lots of evidence about the lives and riches of the most powerful people in the empire, as well as some about the poorer sections of Egyptian life.

Life in Ancient Egypt

The majority of the people who lived in Ancient Egypt were farmers. The land around the River Nile provided excellent soil for agriculture as a result of the annual flooding of the rivers between June and September. Many cereal crops were grown, much of which was in turn developed into bread and beer. These became staple foodstuffs in the kingdoms. Farmers' produce was owned by the landowner or the state. Other Ancient Egyptians worked in professional roles, such as doctors and engineers, while the upper classes of scribes and officials could be identified by their white kilts.

Slavery existed in Ancient Egypt, although it was possible for a slave to buy his freedom, and they were often shown some good treatment, including access to doctors' services.

Women in Ancient Egypt had more rights than in many civilizations of similar times, including the right to own land and property, and to trade and make contracts. It was also possible for a number of women – including the infamous Cleopatra – to become pharaohs of the kingdom.

Changing Times

In the period around 3100 BCE the lands around the Nile in Egypt were united under a single pharaoh – possibly called Menes. This began the first of the main dynastic periods in Egypt.

The period of the Old Kingdom is noted for its significant building projects, including the pyramids at Giza and the Sphinx. This period also saw the construction of a canal system to support irrigation of crops during the dry months. However, towards the end of the period, significant droughts caused problems for Egypt leading to a period of famine.

The Middle Kingdom saw an increase in spending and organisation of defences to protect the kingdom. Religion became more widespread, and pyramids were gradually replaced by more hidden tombs.

During the period of the New Kingdom, the reign of Egyptian pharaohs was initially spread over a greater area. However, the country's riches made it vulnerable to attack and many territories were lost.

The kingdoms eventually came to a demise after a period of Greek Rule, when the Romans ended the reigns of Marc Antony and Cleopatra

Possible Enquiry Questions

- Can a woman be a king?
- What gods did the Ancient Egyptians believe in?
- Why was Ramses II so great?
- Who built the pyramids of Ancient Egypt?
- What do we know about Tutankhamun?
- What would you find inside a pyramid?

Key Individuals

- **Narmer** – said to be the first pharaoh of all Egypt, around 3150 BCE. Also known as warrior Menes.
- **Khufu** – pharaoh responsible for the building of the Great Pyramid at Giza
- **Hatshepsut** – first and longest-reigning female pharaoh
- **Tutankhamun** – youngest pharaoh, famed for his burial tomb in the Valley of the Kings
- **Ramses II** – often known as Ramses the Great, his mummy still rests in Cairo's Egyptian Museum.



Hieroglyphs from the tomb of Seti I ⁸

What did the Ancient Egyptians ever do for us?

Hieroglyphs were obviously a precursor to more modern forms of writing relating to spoken sounds. Related to this, the Egyptians were the first to form writing material in the form of papyrus. In farming, some of the earliest ploughs were used in Ancient Egypt, and the first ploughs drawn by oxen too. Egyptians also invented the first key-operated locks.

Big Concepts

Significant concepts in study of Ancient Egypt could include that of **monarchy**, particularly when contrasted with the democracy of Ancient Greece, also studied in KS2. This could be extended into a wider study of class or **status** in different places.

In addition, the significance of **agriculture** is notable in Egypt, particularly in relation to the Nile.

Places to Visit:

Although obviously no sites of significance exist in the UK, artefacts from Ancient Egypt are found in many British Museums, such as:

- [British Museum](#), London
- [Manchester Museum](#), Manchester
- [World Museum](#), Liverpool
- [Leeds City Museum](#), Leeds
- [Highclere Castle](#), Berkshire
- [Birmingham Museum](#), Birmingham

Timeline of Key Events:

All dates below are approximate

Old Kingdom: 2600 BCE - 2100 BCE

Middle Kingdom: 2000 BCE - 1650 BCE

New Kingdom: 1540 BCE - 1075 BCE

- 7500 BCE** First settlers in Nile valley
- 3500 BCE** First use of hieroglyphic symbols
- 3100 BCE** Narmer unites regions of Lower and Upper Egypt.
- 2650 BCE** First step pyramid built
- 2550 BCE** Pyramids at Giza built
- 2335 BCE** Pyramid texts written (magical spells to protect pharaohs)
- 1472 BCE** Hatshepsut becomes caretaker ruler. (Later declares herself pharaoh)
- 1336 BCE** Tutankhamen becomes pharaoh
- 1279 BCE** Ramses II becomes pharaoh
- 1100 BCE** Upper & Lower Egypt split
- 332 BCE** Alexander the Great conquers Egypt
- 196 BCE** Rosetta stone carved
- 1279 BCE** Ramses II becomes pharaoh
- 30 BCE** Egypt becomes a Roman Province
- 1922 CE** Carter discovers Tutankhamen's tomb

Broader Context

- The Bronze Age started in Europe around 3000 BC and continued to about 800 BC.
- Writing and the calendar was developed in Mesopotamia around 3500 BC, the earliest in the world.
- Early civilisations were:
 - The Ancient Sumer, around 5000 – 1940 BCE
 - the Indus Valley in about 2600-1900 BCE;
 - the Assyrian kingdom in 2400-1800 BCE;
 - the Minoan civilisation on Crete from 1900-1100 BCE

Further Information:

British Museum information :

<http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/>

Children's University: <http://bit.do/CUEgypt>

Primary Homework help: <http://bit.do/PHHEgypt>

Eyelid: <http://www.eyelid.co.uk/>

Birmingham Museum: <http://bit.do/BMEgypt>

⁸Hieroglyphs image [<http://bit.do/glyphs>] by Jon Bodsworth is provided copyright-free and accessed from Wikimedia Commons.