



Brief History of Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egypt was the birthplace of one of the world's first civilization. It began over 5000 years ago and lasted for 2000 years. The Nile River was the life blood of ancient Egypt; it provided rich soil, irrigation, and transportation. The Egyptians named their nation Kemet, Black land, after the rich dark soil of the Nile River.

Egyptian civilization made many contributions to the world. Among them are a 365 - day calendar, hieroglyphics (picture writing), and papyrus (paper like writing material). They also had one of the first national governments and developed a religion that emphasized life after death. However their best known accomplishment are the pyramids, gigantic stone structures built as tombs for the pharaohs(kings that were constructed 4500 years ago and are still standing.

Beginning in about 3500BC King Menes of Upper Egypt conquered Lower Egypt. Memphis became the capital of this new nation. It is near present day Cairo. He also established the first of 30 dynasties to rule Egypt. Egyptian history can be divided into three main periods - the Old Kingdom, The Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. The period prior to the Old Kingdom was ruled by Dynasties I and II which ruled for 400 years. During this time the Egyptians concentrated on internal affairs.

The Old Kingdom began in 2686 BC and was lead by Dynasty III. During this period a strong central government developed. It is also known for the construction of the Great Pyramid and other pyramids at Giza. Dynasty IV was headed by King Khufu. As priests and government officials fought over power, the pharaohs of Dynasty V became weak. The Old Kingdom lasted until 2181 BC.

The Middle Kingdom was ruled by Dynasty XII. In 1991 BC Amenemhet seized the throne and moved the capital to Itjawy near Memphis. Egypt's wealth and power was restored by this dynasty. Egypt conquered Nubia and traded with Syria and Palestine. The Middle Kingdom ended in 1786 BC and had been a period of growth in architecture, literature, and art.

In 1670 BC Egypt was controlled by the Hyksos from Asia. They ruled for 100 years and introduced horse - drawn chariots, improved bows, and other tools of warfare to the Egyptians.

The New Kingdom lasted for 500 years beginning in 1554 BC. Dynasty XVIII drove the Hyksos out of Egypt. Using military techniques learned from the Hyksos, the Egyptians expanded their territory into southwestern Asia. Such rulers as Thutmose I, and Queen Hatshepsut created an empire that reached its height in 1400 BC. During this period Egypt regained control over Kush and Nubia. These two areas were sources of slaves, copper, gold, ivory, and ebony.

During the reign of Amenhotep IV huge religious changes occurred. Amenhotep IV devoted himself to Aten, the sun god. He changed his own name to Akhenaten and said that Aten had replaced all the other gods except Re. He also moved the capital to a new city, Akhetaten. These changes angered many Egyptians. His successor, King Tutankhaten changed his name to Tutankhamun and restored the old religion. Under Horemheb, the last king of the XVIII dynasty, Akhenaten's religious beliefs were completely rejected and during the XIX dynasty the old religion had completely replaced the new religion. Seti I and Ramses II also had regained some Asia territories.

With the advent of the XX Dynasty ancient Egypt began to decline. It broke into smaller states because of the struggle for power between the priests and nobles and lost its empire. Foreign invaders would take advantage of the situation.

Leonard H. Lesko, "Egypt, Ancient", World Book Online Reference Center,
<http://www.aolsvs.worldbook.aol.com/ar/?/na/ar/cp/ar175060>