Ancient Egypt in Context

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, when the individual cultures of different areas were gradually replaced by that of Naqada, an important Predynastic centre in the south. The archaeological record has revealed the spread of the culture known as Naqada II, characterized by attractive buff-coloured pottery decorated with lively scenes of ships, animals and dancing women, throughout the Nile Valley and the Delta.

Political centralization seems to have followed in the wake of cultural unity and is encapsulated in the Narmer Palette, a famous ceremonial object now in the Cairo Museum, which was found at Hierakonpolis, another great, early southern centre. This depicts the early king Narmer (c.3100 BC), wearing the crown of Upper Egypt, possibly subduing people of the Delta, and shows him a second time wearing the crown of Lower Egypt. It is now thought that the Narmer Palette reflects an established situation, with a sole king already in control of the ‘Two Lands’, rather than recording the conquest of the north by a southern king, as was once proposed.

From c.3100 BC, there is evidence for the existence of a capital city at Memphis. Finds from the related cemetery sites of Saqqara and Abydos show that at this time Egypt enjoyed a high level of artistic achievement, was engaged in far-flung trading relations and was administered by a highly organized and structured bureaucracy. Although little is known of political events during the Old Kingdom (c.2686–c.2181 BC) which followed, the period is famous for its monumental architecture. The pyramids of Giza are testimony to the status of the kings and their control over resources of materials and labour, and not least the ability of the administration to organize such colossal enterprises.

This period of strength was followed by well over a century of insecurity, when the rule of Egypt was divided during the First Intermediate Period (c.2181–c.2055 BC). However, towards 2000 BC the kings who ruled from Thebes managed to establish control over the whole country. Mentuhotep II (c.2055–c.2004 BC), who reunited Egypt at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (c.2055–c.1650 BC), was always regarded with great reverence by

▼ During the 4th Dynasty, the kings of Egypt were buried in the famous pyramids at Giza in northern Egypt.
In the New Kingdom, the royal tombs were situated in southern Egypt, in the remote area now known as the Valley of the Kings.

part of the Assyrian Empire for a time during the reign of Sennacherib’s grandson, Ashurbanipal.

The governors of the Delta city of Sais at first ruled with Assyrian backing but were later to reign as the independent kings of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty. The Saite Period (664–525 BC) is regarded as an era of renaissance: culturally, there was a great deal of interest in the art and architecture of the past, which was consciously copied, but the period was also marked by a new realism in both sculpture and literature.

Egypt was once again a united country under a firm central authority and became a power to be reckoned with on the world stage. Military campaigns were mounted to regain control of Nubia, and the Greek historian, Herodotus, describes an expedition sent by Nekau II (610–595 BC) to circumnavigate Africa.

Thereafter, the history of ancient Egypt is pretty much one of conquest by foreign powers: the Persians, Alexander the Great and finally Rome.