

EGYPTIAN CULTURE

LOCATION

Today more than sixty-one million people live in Egypt. Egypt is located in northeastern Africa. On the north it borders the Mediterranean Sea, on the east the Red Sea and the State of Israel in the Sinai desert. Most of the population is concentrated in the Nile Valley, which is only a very small part (six percent) of Egyptian territory. Almost all the rest of the country is desert.

HISTORY

Archaeological evidence shows us that hunters lived in Egypt more than 250,000 years ago when the region was a green grassland. Around 25,000 BC, climate changes turned Egypt into a desert. The people survived by hunting and fishing and through agriculture.

In 3100 BC, King Menes joined the two parts of the land into one kingdom. The Dynasty that he founded, together with the one after it, are now called the "Archaic Period". Egypt soon evolved into a centralized and well organized kingdom. Egypt gained a growing influence in the ancient world and its power came to dominate the Near East for more than 500 years. The construction of the great pyramids of the 4th dynasty (about 2575 - 2465 BC) took place during this time. The new kingdom expanded rapidly and the country was quite stable internally. Ancient Egypt and its culture had a tremendous impact on what is now the Western World.

After the death of Tutankhamon the fourth, the Dynasty and the power of the king weakened.

A period of decline followed and Egypt was invaded by the Assyrians and the Persians, and opened its borders to the Greeks for the first time. The arrival of Alexander the Great in 332 BC put an end to Ancient Egyptian history. For 250 years Egypt was ruled by Greeks; Alexandria, rather than Athens, became the center of learning and culture. The Greeks also introduced new agricultural techniques and restored older temples.

In 30 BC the Romans conquered Egypt. This led to an increase in prosperity in the beginning. But Rome did not give any local autonomy to Egypt and, in the long run, its rule was harmful to Egypt's interests. During the reign of the Roman emperor Nero in the first century, Christianity was brought to Egypt and it spread throughout the country. The Arab conquest of Egypt that began in 639, however, put an end to the dominance of Christian religion. Arab newcomers and the conversion of people to Islam reduced the Christian population. Arabic also became the major language. Egypt then became part of the Muslim world and until the 19th century Egyptian history was linked to the general developments of Islam in the region.

The construction of the Suez Canal in the mid-19th century put Egypt into deep financial debt. In order to solve their financial problems, the Egyptian government had to give up control of the country to other powers, especially Great Britain. The British strengthened their control at the end of the 19th century. During World War I, Great Britain declared Egypt to be a British protectorate.

Egypt received its independence in 1923. This happened after adopting a constitution that made Egypt a kingdom under Fuad. A parliament also came into existence. During World War II, Egypt remained officially neutral. However, Egypt helped the British where possible and several battles were fought on Egyptian soil.

RELIGION

Religion played a central role in the life of ancient Egypt. The Pharaoh was considered a descendent of gods, and therefore a deity himself. People were dedicated to their gods, and worshipped them daily. They trusted the goodness of the gods and of their divine son, the king. Every event had spiritual meaning. As Pharaohs grew more powerful they built splendid temples for their gods, with decorations on the walls, stone and wooden statues, and works of art with precious materials. As the Egyptian religion grew, priests became more and more influential in Egyptian society, to the point that in some periods of history they governed the country together with the pharaoh.

Magical texts were also written in tombs to protect the dead against would-be robbers. Magical spells and religious rituals were also used to treat the sick or injured. If the magic did not work it was considered the will of the god, and not a failure of the magic.

Burying the dead was an important religious event in Egypt. The Egyptians believed in the existence of the life-force that they called Ka. The Ka occupied and accompanied the body throughout life. After death the Ka left the body to take its place in the kingdom of the dead. The Ka, however, could not exist without the body; therefore every effort had to be made to preserve the corpse. For this reason bodies were embalmed and mummified according to traditional methods. Also, wood or stone replicas of the body were put into the tomb in case the mummy was destroyed. The greater the number of statue-duplicates in one's tomb, the more chances the dead person had of resurrection. As a final protection, elaborate tombs, built

in stone, were put up to protect the dead body. Egyptians believed that after arriving in the kingdom of the dead, the Ka was judged by Osiris, the king of the dead, and by his assistants. The dead person's heart was weighed against a feather (Maat), to see if they had been as pure during their lifetime. If the judges decided that the dead person had been a sinner, the Ka was condemned to hunger and thirst. If the decision was favorable, the Ka went to the heavenly realm that was described as an improved version of life on earth.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

Most people in Ancient Egypt lived in villages and towns in the Nile Valley and the Nile Delta. Houses were normally built of mud brick. In ancient Egypt, as now, the favorite location for settlements was on slightly raised ground near the river-bank, where transport and water were easily available and flooding was unlikely.

Until 1000 BC Egypt had only a few urban centers, notably Memphis and Thebes. These cities attracted many people and particularly the elite, while the rest of the Egyptians lived in the countryside and worked in agriculture. Most of the land belonged to the king. In the feudal system land was given to high officials to provide them with an income. The people who lived and worked on the land were not free to leave.

Slavery was common in Egypt. Captives and foreigners, or people who were forced by poverty or debt to sell themselves into service were slaves. Some slaves were fortunate enough to marry members of their owners' families, so that they could eventually become free.

In the early periods of Egypt the king ran the country as his own. Later, the Pharaoh, who was given god-like qualities, was the supreme ruler. The lower levels of the government were formed by local rulers and officials. The ancient temples had both an economic and religious function. The Egyptians were able to organize agriculture in useful ways, with simple means and techniques that tended to originally come from Asia. Also their stone building and figurative arts were of a very high level. The technical and organizational skills developed by Egyptians were indeed remarkable, especially their architecture. The construction of the great pyramids has yet to be fully explained and would be a major challenge to this day.

Women in ancient Egyptian society had a position that was only slightly inferior to that of men. They could own and sell property, and they could also divorce their husbands. They almost never had government jobs, but they became more and more involved in religious affairs as priestesses or "chantresses."

Today Egypt (whose official name is the Arab Republic of Egypt) is a parliamentary democracy. The country's industry has developed a great deal in the 20th century, especially since 1952. This is when Egypt (long a monarchy) became a republic. The state owns much of the economy and plays a key role in economic planning. Beautiful weather, wonderful sandy beaches, and many archeological sites account for the fact that tourism is a main industry that plays an important role in the Egyptian economy.

The major manufactured goods are refined petroleum, chemicals, fertilizers, textiles, clothing, processed foods, construction materials (especially cement), iron and steel, and metal products. The country's farmland is intensively cultivated. However, only 5% of Egypt's total land area is suitable for agriculture. Nonetheless, agriculture is an important economic sector that employs nearly one third of Egypt's workers. The principal crop is cotton (Egypt is the world's sixth largest cotton exporter). Rice, corn, wheat, tomatoes, sugarcane, citrus fruit, dates are also produced.

Cairo, one of the oldest and most famous cities of the world, is the capital. Together with Alexandria, Cairo is also one of the main industrial centers. About 95% of Egyptians are Muslims, and the official language is Arabic. English is the second language.

CULTURE

Egypt has been at the crossroads of different major civilizations. It is indeed one of the most interesting archeological sites of the world because of this. The invention of writing was essential for the system of government that evolved in ancient Egypt and for the preservation of Egyptian culture. The two basic forms of writing, hieroglyphs, which were used for monuments, and the cursive form (known as hieratic), were invented at about the same time (around 3000 BC). Initially, writing was mainly used for administration, later it was used for gathering important traditional information medical texts.

Those who could read and write were called scribes, and they had an important role in ancient Egypt. Their knowledge of writing gave them power over those who could not read or write (the large majority). Ancient texts have been found that encouraged young people to learn to write. Works of literature, mathematical texts, astronomy, medicine, and magic, as well as different religious texts that were written on papyrus, have been preserved by the dry Egyptian climate. They provide us with a great amount of information about this ancient civilization.

The arts are as important in modern Egypt as they were in ancient times. Egypt has produced many great writers. Naguib Mahfouz is perhaps the most famous. Mahfouz has written some 40 novels and short story collections, as well as 30 screenplays and several plays. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988 - the first Arab writer to receive this prize.

