

ANCIENT EGYPT—PART 2



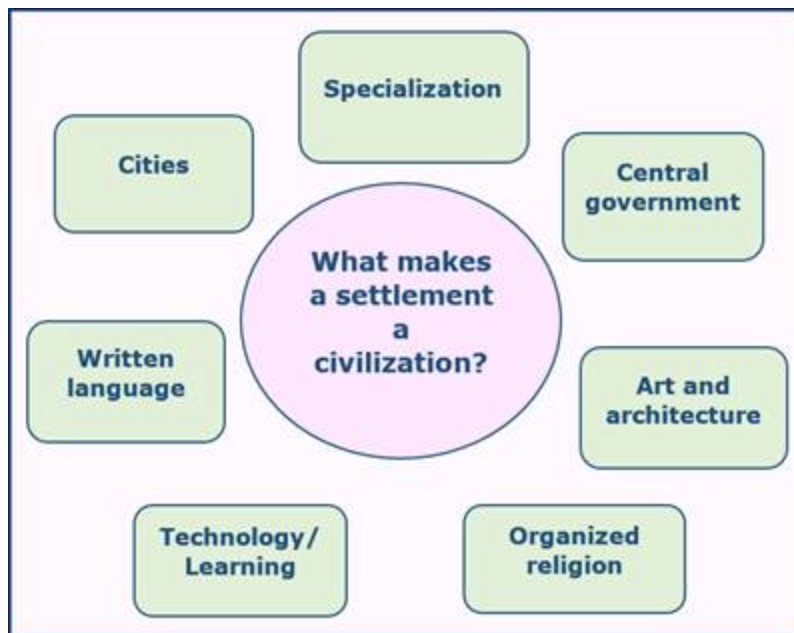
Senet Game Board with Pieces: 1390 B.C.E.

Unit Overview

In this unit, you will discover that ancient Egypt produced more than amazing pyramids, temples and tombs. Strange gods, interesting views on the afterlife and mummies are just some of the things from this culture that continue to fascinate us. Geometry, our calendar and current medical practices all trace their roots back to ancient Egypt. Let's see how it all happened.

Life in Ancient Egypt

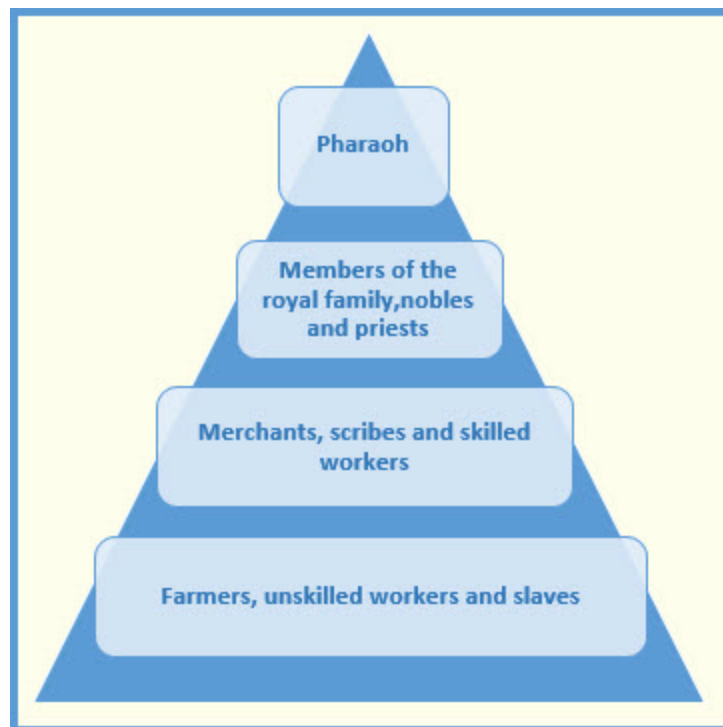
At first, Egyptians lived in small villages along the banks of the Nile River. As time passed, they produced food surpluses. Therefore, everyone no longer had to farm the land. Some people specialized in making furniture, pottery or cloth. Others created works of art and architecture. The economy and the population grew. Egyptians established a central government, cities and an organized religion. They also discovered more efficient ways of doing things through advancements in technology. Because it was important to keep records, Egyptians developed their own written language. In other words, they built a **civilization**.



In ancient Egypt, one **pharaoh**, or leader, after another ruled for over 3,000 years. Although many dynasties rose to power and disappeared during these times, the daily lives of the Egyptians changed very little. Unlike Mesopotamia, Egypt did not often experience attacks from outside forces. The weather was almost always the same. Eight months of the year were sunny and hot. The other four months were sunny and slightly cooler. Most of the region received less than one inch of rainfall annually. Because of these factors, the average Egyptian family continued many of the same practices for centuries.

Egyptian Society

The most powerful person in Egypt was the pharaoh. He or she inherited the position and was considered a god. For this reason, people rarely questioned the authority of the pharaoh. Because the Egyptians believed that the Nile River and its annual floods were gifts from the gods, priests were honored in their society. They were responsible for keeping the gods happy by conducting religious ceremonies and by taking care of the temples. They hired craftsmen and skilled architects to build grand tombs for the pharaohs. After a while, the pharaohs needed help to keep things running smoothly. To make government more efficient, the empire was divided into forty-two provinces. Officials within each province reported to the pharaoh and managed many tasks, including the collection of taxes.



While the pharaoh, members of the royal family, priests and government officials filled the top levels of Egyptian society, farmers, laborers and slaves remained at the bottom of the social pyramid. When farmers were not working in their fields, they were often hired for construction projects. People who were unable to pay their debts, committed crimes or were captured in battle often became slaves. Usually, Egyptian slaves were freed after they had served for a period of time.

Unlike other ancient civilizations, however, Egypt offered women greater equality. They could legally own and manage property. Although most women remained at home and raised their children, some wove cloth or worked with their husbands in the fields. Some women held positions in government, and a few ruled as pharaohs. The first woman to be crowned a pharaoh was **Hatshepsut**. You can see her statue below. The video describes her reign and the massive building projects that she directed.



Children in Egypt played with dolls, stuffed animals, and marbles. Along with competing in sports that used balls and sticks, Egyptians enjoyed a board game called **Senet**. The picture at the beginning of this unit shows the board and pieces used to play this game. Boys and girls from wealthier families attended schools operated by scribes. However, most children were taught at home and eventually did the same jobs as their parents and grandparents. Most Egyptians married in their middle teens. This seems very young by today's standards, but the life expectancy of the average Egyptian was thirty-six years.

The Egyptian Gods and the Afterlife

The Egyptians practiced **polytheism**, or the belief in several gods. Some of the most important ones are listed in the table below. As you can see, most of the gods and goddesses were associated with forces of nature, such as water and sunshine, or the afterlife.

Some Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt	
Anubis	The god of funerals and embalming
Anuket	The goddess of the Nile River
Horus	The god of the sky
Isis	The goddess of magic and healing
Osiris	The god of the underworld and the afterlife
Ra	The god of the noon sun
Set	The god of chaos and change
Sobek	The god of the Nile River and its crocodiles
Troth	The god of knowledge and wisdom

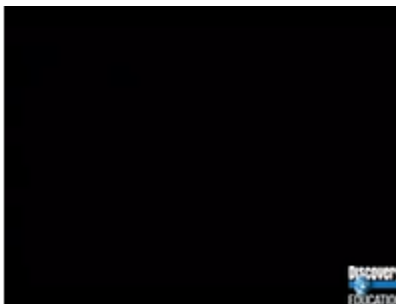
Paintings, carvings and statues preserved in ancient tombs and temples give us an idea of what the Egyptians thought their gods looked like. Sobek, for example, is pictured as having the head of a crocodile and the body of a man.

Egyptians believed that their relationship with the gods carried over into the **afterlife**, or the continuation of life after death. Some ancient cultures thought that the afterlife would be sad, gloomy and miserable. This was not true of the Egyptians. They looked forward to a perfect existence and ideal conditions, but not everyone was guaranteed this reward. Egyptians thought that bad behavior and evil deeds made the heart heavy. **Anubis**, one of the gods, weighed the heart of each person when they arrived in the underworld. Only those whose hearts were lighter than a feather gained entrance to the afterlife.

Anubis Holding a Heart and a Feather



Egyptians also thought that they would need their physical bodies in the afterlife. Therefore, it was important to preserve them. To make this happen, they developed the process of **embalming**. When a person died, an embalmer removed all the internal organs with the exception of the heart. This required great skill because the surgeon had to avoid damaging the rest of the body. The remaining shell was filled with salt, herbs and spices. After the body dried, the embalmer wrapped it hundreds of strips of linen cloth to create a **mummy**, which was much less likely to decay. The entire procedure took about ninety days. It was so expensive that most Egyptians simply could not afford it. Most embalmed bodies were those of pharaohs and members of the royal family. Learn more about the process of mummification by watching the video listed below.



Mummified bodies were placed in coffins inside tombs. Tombs took various forms. Some were pyramids like the ones in Giza; others were caves like the ones in the Valley of the Kings. Artists often decorated the inside of the tomb with paintings that

reflected the person's life. Statues of guards and soldiers that would come to life in the underworld were also sometimes included. Things that would be useful in the afterlife or that the person enjoyed were added, too. For example, one pharaoh's tomb included a full-sized boat for sailing on the rivers in the afterlife.

The Development of Written Language

As their civilization expanded, the Egyptians recognized the importance of keeping records. To meet this need, they developed a writing system based on **hieroglyphs**. Hieroglyphs are pictures that represent sounds and words. At first, the hieroglyphic system consisted of about 700 characters. Eventually, it included over 6,000 symbols. When Egypt declined, the ability to read and write hieroglyphics was lost, and it was replaced by other languages. For centuries, historians and scholars were unable to decipher the meaning of ancient documents and inscriptions on tombs.

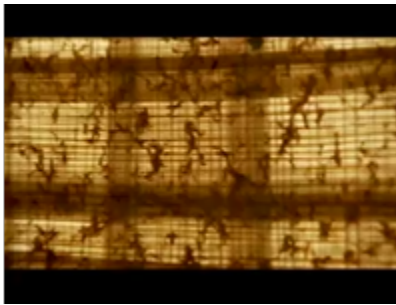


However, a major clue to solving the mystery of hieroglyphics was discovered by a group of French soldiers serving in Egypt in 1799. Named the **Rosetta Stone**, this polished rock was inscribed with the same message in three languages—hieroglyphics, a different version of hieroglyphics and Greek. **Jean Francois Champollion**, a language expert, cracked the code with similar skills that we use to work **cryptogram** puzzles today. Because of Champollion's work, we now know and understand much

more about the ancient Egyptians. Have you ever solved a cryptogram puzzle? Click on the icon below to try one.



At first, Egyptians recorded information on clay and stone, but they soon developed a better writing surface. They used **papyrus** reeds that grew along the banks of the Nile River to create a paper-like material named after the plants. Collecting the papyrus reeds was a dangerous business as you will see when you watch the video listed below. Workers cut the reeds into strips, pressed them into thin sheets and dried them. The sheets were rolled into scrolls, which were easily carried and stored.

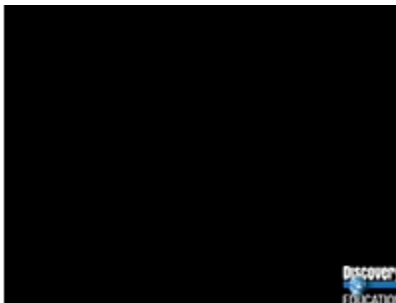
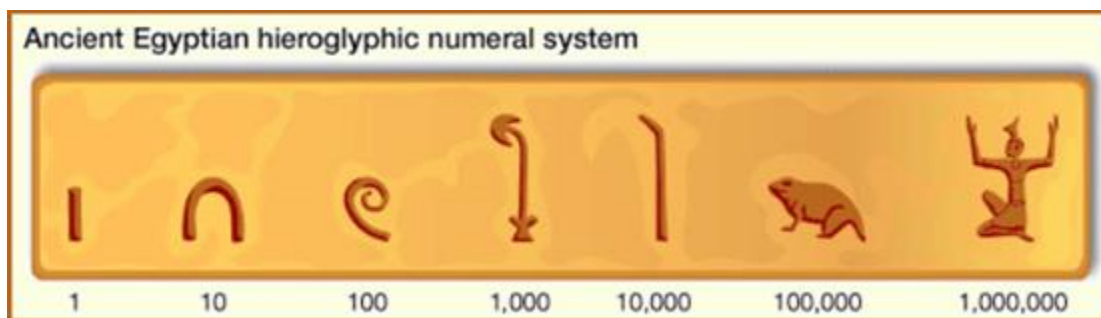


Advancements in Learning and Technology

Although their pyramids and magnificent temples still amaze us, the Egyptians made other contributions that continue to impact our modern world. Some of these achievements were related to floods along the Nile River. Can you imagine life without a 365-day calendar? As Egyptian priests scanned the sky, they noticed that a particular star, later called **Sirius**, appeared shortly before the Nile River flooded. The star returned to that same position every year after exactly 365 days. The Egyptians divided the number of days between the appearances of Sirius into twelve months with thirty days each. The remaining five days were used for holidays and celebrations.

The calendar helped farmers to plant their crops at the right time and to harvest them before the flood.

The rising waters often washed away boundaries and property divisions. This meant that the land had to be surveyed, re-measured and marked. To save time and money, Egyptians came up with an efficient mathematical system to accomplish this task. It later developed into what we call **geometry**. At the same time, the government had to decide how much tax Egyptians had to pay and how to collect it. This led to the development of a system of written numbers for counting, adding, and subtracting. You can see some of the hieroglyphic symbols used for numbers in the graphic below and in the video. This knowledge spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Pythagoras, a Greek who is often called the father of modern mathematics, was actually trained in Egypt.



In many ways, Egyptian medical knowledge has become the foundation of modern medicine. Although they sometimes relied on spells and magic words, doctors, who were part of this ancient civilization, examined patients, conducted tests and made diagnoses. They set broken bones, healed wounds and made medicines from herbs. Because they helped prepare bodies for mummification, many of Egypt's doctors were

also skillful surgeons. This experience gave them a good understanding of the body's internal organs and their functions. As their medical reputations spread, people came from all over the Mediterranean region to learn and to ask advice from Egypt's doctors.

How Do We Know so Much about the Ancient Egyptians?

How do we know so much about life in ancient Egypt? After all, the people that we have been reading about existed a very long time ago. We have learned a great deal from documents and inscriptions that were written in hieroglyphics. Artifacts have also revealed many things about this African civilization. However, recovering these objects was not as easy as you might think. Yes, the pharaohs and members of their families were often buried with items to help them enjoy the afterlife. Some of these things were made from or trimmed in gold. Embalmers sometimes added jewels and gem stones to the linen wrappings surrounding a mummy. Unfortunately, every society has its share of criminals, and ancient Egypt was no exception. Pyramids and tombs were often raided and robbed of their treasures.



Nonetheless, over the centuries, **Egyptologists**, or archaeologists that concentrate on the study of ancient Egypt, have found tombs to be a valuable source of information. The Tomb of **Tutankhamen**, located in the Valley of the Kings, is a rare example of a burial place that was found intact. This relatively small tomb was built for Tutankhamen, a young boy crowned pharaoh at the age of eight. He died at seventeen. **Howard Carter**, a British archeologist, and **Lord Carnarvon**, his financial backer, excavated the tomb with a crew of workmen in 1922. It included the ruler's mummified body and over 3,000 artifacts that are still being examined and categorized. It is considered one of the world's top historical discoveries. The search for clues that tell us about life in ancient Egypt continues today. In 2018, archaeologists uncovered the tomb of **Hetpet**, an Egyptian priestess. Although her mummy is missing, the articles found on the burial site are over 4,000 years old.

As we wrap up our work on ancient Egypt, think about Mesopotamia, another ancient civilization that you recently studied. How were these two civilizations alike? How were they different? Click on the icon below. The worksheet will test your knowledge of the similarities and differences between life along the Nile and life in the Fertile Crescent.



Time for a Quick Review

Before moving on to Unit 14, review the names and terms found in Unit 13. Be sure you can answer the “Can I” questions with a loud “yes”.

Can I

...describe the social structure of ancient Egypt?

...explain how ancient Egypt differed from other early civilizations in the treatment of women?

...describe the Egyptian view of the afterlife and its impact on burial practices?

...identify sources of information that provide historians with knowledge about life in ancient Egypt?

...give examples of the lasting impact of Egyptian civilization?



Additional Activities and Resources

[Unit 13 Organizer](#)

[Ancient Egyptian Social Structure](#) (article with quiz)