Old Kingdom, Egypt

The Egyptian Old Kingdom (Third–Sixth Dynasties; c. 2686–2181 B.C.E.) was the coming of age of Egyptian civilization, representing the first sustained period of united Egyptian power, achievement, and societal complexity. The structure and wisdom tradition of the Old Kingdom permanently impacted and shaped Egyptian culture. The social structure of the Old Kingdom was extremely hierarchical, with a highly centralized state ruled by an absolute, semidivine king reigning from the capital at Memphis. The king was thought to be the incarnation of the god Horus, the son of the god Osiris—even kings of originally nonroyal blood assumed this role. The king had many titles, most commonly the polite “his majesty” (the famous appellation pharaoh is the Greek transcription of pr-aa, meaning “Great House,” a title commonly used in the later New Kingdom).

The two halves of Egypt (Upper and Lower Egypt) had already been united under one king in approximately 3100 B.C.E., but the Third Dynasty’s division of the country into nomes (a Greek term for provinces) ruled by the king through nomarchs (local governors) allowed a greater centralization of power. Early in the Old Kingdom, these nomarchs were generally members of the royal family, but as the kingdom weakened in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties, this was no longer as consistently true. Also of importance was the chaty (typically translated as “vizier” or “prime minister”), the chief administrator and adviser of the king. During the Fifth and much of the Sixth Dynasties there were two viziers—one for Upper Egypt and one for Lower Egypt. Later records (from long after the Old Kingdom) indicate that the vizier was in charge of everything from taxation and civic order to mobilization of troops, architecture, and agriculture. He was also a high-ranking religious figure on par with the highest priests.

Since the vast majority of Old Kingdom Egypt was illiterate, professional scribes also held an extremely important function in maintaining social order. Thanks to the development of hieroglyphics, a form of writing using pictures and characters, each representing particular sounds or phonemes, complex records could finally be kept, allowing for a much more organized and centralized social structure. Scribes also held a religiously important position as written language was regarded as the language of the gods and allowed for a greater continuity of religious tradition. The wisdom preserved through the newly developed scribal tradition (most notably sayings ascribed to Imhotep and Ptahhotep), remained influential throughout the rest of ancient Egyptian history.

The economy of the Old Kingdom was heavily dependent on the yearly inundation of the Nile, which brought precious nutrients to the soil and allowed for a productive agricultural yield. Too little or too much flooding was disastrous to the Egyptian economy, with famine always possible. The king was thought to be capable of ensuring proper inundation and therefore a good yield; a poor inundation was therefore a poor reflection upon the king. In addition to agriculture, the wealth of the Old Kingdom allowed for trade with western Asia through Byblos, as well as military and trade incursions to Sinai, Nubia, and Libya. Mines for important materials such as stone, copper, silver, and gold were also an important source for the Old Kingdom’s economy.

The Old Kingdom’s lasting achievement was the construction of pyramid complexes, beginning with the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, which was built under the direction of Imhotep, Djoser’s vizier. Perhaps due to this achievement, in later periods Imhotep also received acclaim as a great sage and writer and (in the Late Kingdom) was even identified with Asclepius, the Greek god of learning. These pyramids were the focal point of larger pyramid complexes, which included several buildings used for the mortuary cults of the deceased kings (that of Khufu continued nearly 2,000 years).

The height of pyramid building occurred in the Fourth Dynasty (sometimes called the “Pyramid Age”). Sneferu, the first king of this dynasty, was responsible for three pyramids, most notably the Bent Pyramid at Dashur. The Great Pyramid at Giza, which upon com-
Olmecs

The Olmec thrived in the Gulf of Mexico coastal lowlands (in the present-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco) from around 1500 to 400 B.C.E. The Olmec are one of several interrelated but largely independent cultural formations developing in Mesoamerica during roughly the same time period. Together with the highland and lowland Maya, the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples of the Oaxaca Valley, and various culture groups in the central highlands and Basin of Mexico, the Olmec were among the first and most sophisticated Mesoamerican civilizations. Linguists classify their language in the Mixe-Zoquean family, remnants of which survive in various pockets in southern Mexico. Olmec is a Nahuacl word (the language of the Aztec), imposed by U.S. archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling in the 1940s, roughly translating as "people of the land of rubber." By around 1800 B.C.E. the semisedentary peoples occupying the gulf coast region exhibited cultural traits not dissimilar from their neighbors elsewhere in Mesoamerica. During the next few centuries, a kind of cultural critical mass was reached, prompting the Olmec to create one of Mesoamerica's first and most distinctive state and cultural systems.

With the Gulf of Mexico providing ample maritime resources and a fertile plateau with the Tuxtla Mountains and their raging rivers looming behind it, the region exhibited many of the environmental attributes necessary for the emergence of complex civilization. By 1500 B.C.E. the Olmec had built an elaborate ceremonial structure at San Lorenzo, within which the ruling groups resided. It is estimated that some 81 million cubic feet of rock, most probably floated on rafts from mountain quarries nearly 50 miles away, provided the structural foundation for the ceremonial platform, which rose 151 feet high and covered nearly 0.5 sq. mile. Surrounding the ceremonial center were hamlets and villages inhabited by farmers, artisans, and commoners, covering nearly 3 sq. miles. The magnitude of the construction indicates a high degree of control over surplus labor by members of the ruling elite. For reasons still not understood, San Lorenzo fell and was abandoned around 1200 B.C.E. Archaeologists have interpreted evidence of ritual desecration of the site's structures and sculptures as originating in internal rebellion, as a kind of religious cleansing.

Around 1150 B.C.E. and some 50 miles to the northeast, the Olmec successors to San Lorenzo began building an even larger and more imposing urban center at La Venta. For the next six centuries, from around 1150 to 500 B.C.E., the city thrived. At its ceremonial core was a


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