

EGYPT

Ancient Egypt was the preeminent civilization in the Mediterranean world for almost 30 centuries—from its unification around 3100 B.C. to its conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. From the great pyramids of the Old Kingdom through the military conquests of the New Kingdom, Egypt's majesty has long entranced archaeologists and historians and created a vibrant field of study all its own: Egyptology. The main sources of information about ancient Egypt are the many monuments, objects and artifacts that have been recovered from archaeological sites, covered with hieroglyphs that have only recently been deciphered. The picture that emerges is of a culture with few equals in the beauty of its art, the accomplishment of its architecture or the richness of its religious traditions.

Around 3400 B.C., two separate kingdoms were established near the Fertile Crescent, an area home to some of the world's oldest civilizations: the Red Land to the north, based in the Nile River Delta and extending along the Nile perhaps to Atfih; and the White Land in the south, stretching from Atfih to Gebel es-Silsila. A southern king, Scorpion, made the first attempts to conquer the northern kingdom around 3200 B.C. A century later, King Menes would subdue the north and unify the country,

becoming the first king of the first dynasty.

Archaic (Early Dynastic) Period (c. 3100-2686 B.C.)

King Menes founded the capital of ancient Egypt at White Walls (later known as Memphis), in the north, near the apex of the Nile River delta. The capital would grow into a great metropolis that dominated Egyptian society during the Old Kingdom period. The Archaic Period saw the development of the foundations of Egyptian society, including the all-important ideology of kingship. To the ancient Egyptians, the king was a godlike being, closely identified with the all-powerful god Horus. The earliest known hieroglyphic writing also dates to this period.

In the Archaic Period, as in all other periods, most ancient Egyptians were farmers living in small villages, and agriculture (largely wheat and barley) formed the economic base of the Egyptian state. The annual flooding of the great Nile River provided the necessary irrigation and fertilization each year; farmers sowed the wheat after the flooding receded and harvested it before the season of high temperatures and drought returned.

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