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HISTORY

OF THE

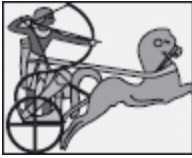
ANCIENT

WORLD

Marc Van De Mieroop

A History of Ancient Egypt

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



Preface

Visitors to bookstores and school and public libraries easily find titles on ancient Egypt. Works on Egyptian gods, the Book of the Dead, tombs, and pharaohs are abundant and new ones continue to appear. Is another publication that does not introduce material newly excavated or rediscovered in a museum then really needed? As a historian I thought so - otherwise this would have been a futile project. Basic surveys of the history of ancient Egypt are remarkably rare and those that exist tend to be either brief and geared toward a very general audience or detailed and intended for people who have made Egyptology a lifetime pursuit. My aim here is to present something in between: an introductory overview of Egypt's ancient past in a single voice that, I hope, will encourage readers to delve further into one of the most fascinating civilizations in world history. This volume aims to serve as an introductory textbook for courses on ancient Egypt, but also to give the many people intrigued by its culture a general summary of the historical situation in the more than 3,000 years of its existence. As the author I had to make many choices about what to include and to omit and where to focus attention, and it may be useful to provide some clarifications on what inspired my decisions.

Even if scholars of ancient Egypt often complain that something is unknowable because of a lack of evidence - a great problem in the study of its history indeed - there still is a vast number of topics we can discuss. What I present here is a personal selection from a host of possibilities. I know that many readers will feel that I unjustly ignored or

gave short shrift to subjects they find interesting: art, material culture, religion, war, women, and so on. I focus here on political history, but I also stress social interactions and give special attention to how later people – including we today – looked back on periods or individuals of ancient Egypt. I am well aware that others would have written a different book and would have focused attention on questions that concern them more, but I hope my choices are not too idiosyncratic and will appeal to many readers.

Although I organized the book according to the standard sequence of periods we recognize in Egyptian history, in the chapter narratives I have tried to avoid a format that many surveys use. The ancient sources encourage a presentation of Egypt's history as a progression of individual reigns nicely grouped into 31 dynasties. This framework is quite secure and provides a straightforward structure that is easy to follow, but it prevents the recognition of patterns and can be monotonous. Because the dynastic organization is so central to the way in which scholars study any aspect of ancient Egypt, however, in each chapter I have provided very brief summaries that highlight reigns and dynasties, so that readers can more easily connect information they read or see in other books, articles, museums, and TV programs to my discussions. But in the main narratives I have avoided a purely chronological account.

Introductory histories often present information without contextualizing the evidence. Even if they make meticulous reference to specific inscriptions or papyri, it is not always clear whether these sources are unique or selected from many similar ones. So I start each chapter with a brief survey of the ancient written evidence available on the period it covers. Because the analysis of primary sources is such an important part of a historian's task, I also discuss one or more documents in detail in each chapter. Reading

ancient historical sources is not straightforward and they require much interpretation before they become the building blocks of the histories we produce. It is important thus to realize what the nature of the evidence is that historians use to investigate a particular period or question.

Finally, perhaps the most difficult challenge in writing introductory surveys is that they do not argue – they assert. Even if sentences are qualified by words like “seemingly” (often omitted to avoid clutter in the text), they give the impression that there is certainty. That is far from true. Every page, if not paragraph, of this book probably contains a statement that will offend someone who has argued differently in writing or lectures. It is impossible to acknowledge every scholarly opinion in an introductory book that covers the entirety of ancient Egyptian history. I chose to follow interpretations that I found the most convincing or appealing, and in the Guide to Further Reading I give preference to works that were the most useful in guiding my decisions. Like most of my colleagues, as a teacher I demand from my students that they acknowledge the sources they use when writing a research paper. It may thus seem that I set the wrong example here by not specifically referencing where I found an idea or what scholar’s view I follow. If I had chosen to give full bibliographic references, I would have produced a very different book, longer and probably more daunting to a general reader. But, in order to counteract the impression that what I have written is generally accepted fact, I have included sections called Key Debates in each chapter to survey different views on a specific topic and give more detailed notes with scholarly references. In these sections I often stress how interpretations have evolved because of changing modern preoccupations rather than a clearer understanding. Historians do not live in a vacuum and their

interests and explanations reflect their own conditions. I admit that even in these sections I could not acknowledge all that has been written on a topic; the bibliography is simply too vast.

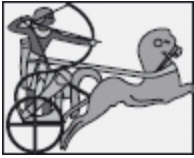
I include a number of websites in my citations, which may seem to some colleagues as pandering to a technology that has not yet proven its scholarly validity. Indeed, one of the most annoying aspects about the treatment of ancient Egypt on the worldwide Web is the amount of hogwash that presents itself with the same authority as the results of high-level scientific investigation. The impact of the Web on our access to knowledge cannot be ignored, however, and (although I am not very savvy in its use) I refer to sites that seem useful and often have many images. As is the case for my references to print publications, they are partial. I should reiterate that this book is an introduction. I hope it will lead the reader into further exploration of the ancient Egyptian civilization, one of the greatest in human history.

Writing this book has been a long-term undertaking and I have to thank several people for their help and encouragement. Al Bertrand first interested me in the project and arranged for a team of scholars to read all or substantial parts of the work. I am much in debt to Ronald Leprohon, Gay Robins, Thomas Schneider, and Willeke Wendrich, who saved me from embarrassing mistakes and urged me to formulate ideas more clearly. John Baines read the entire manuscript with his usual insightfulness and attention to detail, and suggested improvements on every aspect of it. Katya Barbash (Brooklyn Museum, New York) and Robert Simpson (Oriental Institute, University of Oxford) updated and standardized the translations of Egyptian sources quoted. Richard Parkinson (British Museum, London) allowed me to quote several of his translations verbatim, as did Robert Simpson for the

Rosetta Stone. As usual all remaining errors are my own responsibility.

The Wiley-Blackwell staff, as always, was very helpful and efficient. I thank Haze Humbert, who took over from Al Bertrand as acquisitions editor, Deirdre Ilkson, and Galen Smith. Finally, I am grateful for my students at Columbia University who over many years listened to my lectures on ancient Egyptian history and forced me to sharpen my thoughts and improve my methods of presentation. I am especially indebted to the group that took the course in the spring of 2009 (too many to name individually) and used the manuscript in progress as a textbook. I informed them that they were guinea pigs and they seem to have survived the trial quite well.

New York
November 30, 2009



1

Introductory Concerns

Rather make my country's high pyramides my gibbet and hang me up in chains. (Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* Act 5, scene 2)

The tourist to Egypt who sails up the Nile from Cairo to Aswan gazes upon an abundance of grandiose monuments, often remarkably well preserved despite their enormous antiquity. Many of them are icons of ancient Egypt and have been so for centuries. Shakespeare's audience recognized the image Cleopatra conjured up when she called the pyramids her gallows. Modern guided tours always include these same pyramids, as well as the great Amun temple at Luxor with the royal tombs across the river, and the much smaller temple of Isis at Philae between the old and the High Aswan dams. These monuments, spread over hundreds of miles, are all different from what surrounds the traveler at home, alien in their function, their form, and their use of images and writing. They share so many characteristics that it is easy to forget that their builders lived countless years apart. More time passed between the construction of the pyramids at Giza and the building of the Philae temple we now see, than between the latter temple's inauguration and us.

1.1 What Is Ancient Egypt?

Chronological boundaries

It may seem easy to look at something – a monument, coffin, statue, or inscription – and call it ancient Egyptian, but it is not so simple to draw the boundaries of ancient Egypt both in time and space. In the late fourth century ad, the Roman emperor Theodosius issued an edict closing all Egyptian temples and dispersing the priesthood. His act ended the knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs, which could no longer be taught. Can we take the withdrawal of official support for ancient Egyptian cults and writing systems as the end of ancient Egypt? Theodosius's edict only affected a small minority of people that had long been under threat. Ancient Egyptian cultural characteristics had been immersed in a world inspired by Hellenistic, Roman, and Christian ideas for centuries. Certainly in political terms Egypt had lost its separate identity hundreds of years earlier. From the Persian conquest in 525 bc on, but for brief spells of independence, the land had been subjected to outside control. In native traditions the Persian rulers were still considered part of the long line of Egyptian pharaohs, but their successors were different. Modern historians do not call the Greek and Roman rulers of Egypt pharaohs, although their Egyptian subjects continued to represent them with full pharaonic regalia. Is "Egypt after the pharaohs" no longer part of ancient Egyptian history then? Individual scholars and institutions use different approaches. Some histories of ancient Egypt end with Alexander of Macedon's conquest in 332 bc, others at the death of Cleopatra in 30 bc, yet others run into the Roman Period up to ad 395 and Theodosius's reign.

It is always difficult to draw a line after an era in history, as all aspects of life rarely changed simultaneously. More often the change in the sources that modern scholars use determines where they end historical periods. In Egypt's case the gradual replacement of the traditional Egyptian language and writing systems by the Greek language and

script necessitates a different type of scholarship. Most specialists of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing do not easily read Greek sources and vice versa. Although the ancient Egyptian scripts survived after the Greek conquest of the country, there was a constant increase in the use of Greek writing, which turns the modern study of Egypt into a different discipline. Yet, Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt in many respects preserved ancient Egyptian traditions and customs, so I will include a discussion of that period in this survey.

If the disappearance of ancient Egyptian writing in the late 4th century ad heralds the end of the civilization, does its invention around 3000 bc indicate the beginning? No single event announced a new era, but from around 3400 to 3000 bc fundamental changes that were clearly interrelated took place in Egypt and forged a new society. Those innovations included the invention of writing, a process that lasted many centuries from the earliest experiments around 3250 to the first entire sentence written out around 2750. In the last centuries of the fourth millennium the unified Egyptian state arose and that period can serve as the beginning of Egyptian history despite its vague boundaries. Naturally, what preceded unification—Egyptian prehistory—was not unimportant and contained the germs of many elements of the country's historical culture. Hence, I will sketch some of the prehistoric developments in this chapter to make the influences clear, but the creation of the state with the coincident invention of writing and other aspects of culture will indicate the start of Egypt's history here.

Geographical boundaries

Where are the borders of ancient Egypt? Arabic speakers today use the same name for the modern country of Egypt as did the people of the Near East in the millennia bc, Misr. Other people employ a form of the Greek term Aegyptos,

which may derive from Hikuptah, the name of a temple and neighborhood in the city Memphis. It is easy to equate the ancient and modern countries, but today's remarkably straight borders, which imperial powers drew in modern times, do not mark the limits of ancient Egypt. We can better envision those by using as a starting point what is and always was the lifeline of the country, the Nile.

Running through a narrow valley south of modern Cairo and fanning out into a wide alluvial plain north of the city, the river enables people to farm, live in villages and cities, and build and create the monuments and other remains we use to reconstruct the country's history. From the first cataract at Aswan to the Mediterranean Sea it forms the core of Egypt, today as in the past. The people who lived in this core reached beyond it into the western and eastern deserts and upriver south of the first cataract. At times their reach was extensive, affecting distant places in the west, areas along the Mediterranean coast in the east and north, and parts of the Nile Valley deep into modern Sudan.

It is not always obvious how far ancient Egypt extended, and our ability to determine that often depends on research priorities and modern events. As tourists still do today, the earliest explorers of ancient Egypt focused their attention almost exclusively on the Nile Valley, where monuments and ancient sites are visible and in easy reach. It requires a different effort to venture into the deserts beyond the valley, very inhospitable and so vast that ancient remains are not always easy to find. Yet the ancient Egyptians traveled through this hinterland and settled in oases. In recent years archaeologists have spent much more time investigating these zones than they did before, a deliberate shift of research strategies. Sometimes the move is less voluntary. When the modern Egyptian state decided to construct the Aswan High dam in the 1960s, it was clear that the artificial lake behind it would submerge a vast

zone with ancient Egyptian remains. Thus archaeologists rushed to the region, producing in a short time-span many more data than had been collected in a hundred years of earlier research.

Despite the greater attention that archaeologists now devote to the areas of Egypt outside the Nile Valley, they still spend most of their time in the core area, and conditions in the valley dictate to a great extent how we view the ancient country. It is easy to think that Egypt was a place of tombs and temples only, as those so dominate the ancient remains. Built of stone or carved in the rocks, they are well preserved, a preservation aided by the fact that they are often located at the desert's edge, out of the reach of Nile floods and of farmers who need the land they occupy for fields. Compared to tombs and temples, the remains of ancient settlements, built in mud brick in a valley that was annually flooded before the Aswan dam's construction, are paltry. Buried underneath thick layers of silt deposit they are mostly inaccessible and unidentified. The lack of knowledge about the settlements where the ancient Egyptians lived was so great that scholars long called ancient Egypt a civilization without cities. Even now that archaeologists make concerted efforts to explore more than temples and tombs, information about the living conditions of the ancient Egyptian remains limited and dispersed.

What is ancient Egyptian history?

The question "what is history" is much too wide-ranging and thorny to address here, but before embarking on reading a book-long history of ancient Egypt it may be useful to see how it applies to that ancient culture. Less than 200 years ago many would have said that ancient Egypt does not have history. In the early 19th century the influential philosopher of history, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

Hegel (1770–1831), proclaimed that cultures without accounts of the past resembling historical writings in the western tradition had no history. But the discipline has moved on enormously and today most literate cultures – including ancient Egypt – are considered worthy of historical study. The field of “ world history ” goes further and includes the world’s non-literate societies in its purview. This attitude erases the distinction between history and prehistory, a step whose consequences are not yet fully appreciated. It has the benefit for students of ancient Egypt that it removes the awkward problem of what sources they use in their research. Historians mostly consider textual sources to be the basis of their work, but in the case of Egypt we have to wait until the second millennium bc for a written record that is rich and informative about multiple aspects of life. Archaeological and visual remains are often the sole sources for earlier periods, and they stay very important throughout the study of ancient Egyptian history. Writing Egypt’s history requires thus a somewhat different approach than for other periods and places where narrative and documentary sources provide a firm outline.

This book is called “ A History of Ancient Egypt, ” because it is clear that many other “ histories ” can be written, each with their own focus and intent. Historians can concentrate on political issues, social, economic, or cultural ones, each of which will provide a different picture of the society they discuss. Most basic surveys build their structure around political history. This will also be the case here, although it does not monopolize the account, and I will also address other concerns. The choices I made are personal but inspired by other treatments of the subject. Ideally more attention would have been given to topics such as the visual arts, but this book is intended as an introduction only and hopes to inspire further reading and study.

Who are the ancient Egyptians?

When we think about peoples of the past, we intuitively try to imagine what they would have looked like in real life, to visualize their physical features, dress, and general appearance. Popular culture regularly portrays ancient Egyptians and the various ways in which this has happened shows how impressions change over time. Take Queen Cleopatra, for example, the last ruler of the country at least partly of Egyptian descent. The repeated filming of the story of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, quoted before here, shows how the image of this woman has changed. The 1963 Hollywood blockbuster featured the British-born Caucasian Elizabeth Taylor as the queen; in a 1999 movie made for TV a Latin-American actress of mixed Chilean-French parentage, Leonor Varela, played the part. A calendar issued somewhat earlier by an American beverage company entitled "Great Kings and Queens of Africa" included a depiction of Cleopatra as a black African woman. These changes in the queen's representation did not result from scholarly reconsiderations of ancient data, but from changing perceptions in the popular mind about the context of ancient Egypt.

It was only recently that scholars started to acknowledge the African background of Egyptian culture as a consequence of contemporary cultural identity politics that tried to replace the dominant western-centered views on world history with a greater focus on Africa's contributions. One manifestation of these ideas, Afrocentricity, highlights the ancient Egyptians as black Africans who brought about many of the cultural innovations credited to the ancient Greeks. Initially Egyptologists bluntly dismissed these proposals, but in recent years a greater willingness to engage with them has developed. This new attitude has not made it easier to visualize the ancient Egyptians, however, as their relationship with other African peoples is not

obvious, as is true for Egypt's overall contacts with the rest of Africa. While ancient Egypt was clearly "in Africa" it was not so clearly "of Africa." Archaeological and textual evidence for Egyptian contacts in the continent beyond its immediate neighbors is so far minimal and limited to the import of luxury items. The contributions of Egypt to other African cultures were at best ambiguous, and in general Egypt's interactions with Asiatic regions were closer and more evident. Was the same true for the population of the country and did the ancient Egyptians leave any reliable data that could guide our imagination?

There exist countless pictures of humans from ancient Egypt, but it is clear that these were not intended as accurate portraits, except for some late examples from Ptolemaic and Roman times. Men and women appear in standardized depictions where physical features, hairdos, clothing, and even posture characterize them as Egyptians. The representations of foreigners are equally uniform: Nubians have dark skins and braided hair (Plate 1), while Syrians have lighter skins and pointed beards (Plate 2). Clothing often also sets apart various peoples. The artists were intent upon showing the opposition between Egyptians and foreigners, not to make clear their individual appearances. The perception of who was Egyptian could change according to the intended audience. For example, a prince from Upper Nubia in the 14th century, Hekanefer, appears in two different guises. In the tomb of the Egyptian viceroy at Thebes Hekanefer has typical Nubian features and dress, while in his own burial in Nubia he looks fully Egyptian (Figure [1.1](#)). He wanted his own people to see him as a member of the Egyptian ruling class, whereas to the Egyptian viceroy of his country he was a Nubian subject, clearly distinct from Egyptians.

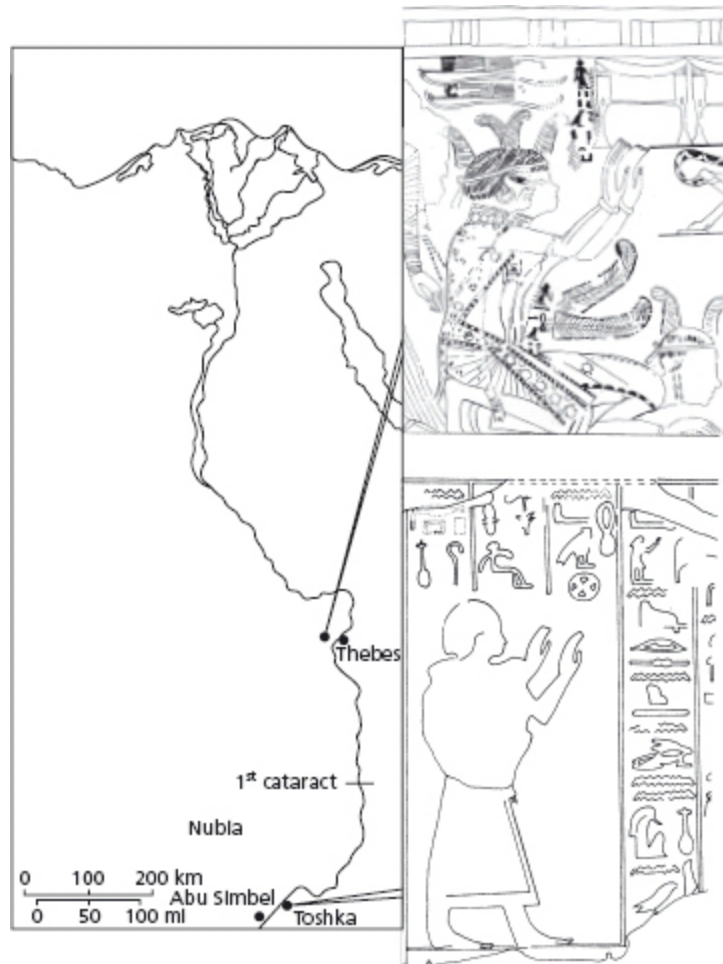


Figure 1.1 The Lower Nubian prince Hekanefer appears as an Egyptian in the representation in his own tomb at Toshka, while in a Theban tomb he is depicted as a typical Nubian

The homogeneity of Egyptians in ancient depictions is deceptive. Over the millennia Egyptian society constantly integrated newcomers with various origins, physical features, and customs. But unless there was a reason to make the difference explicit, they all appeared alike in stereotypical depictions. They were all Egyptians, not people with Nubian, Syrian, Greek, or other backgrounds. Some scholars have tried to determine what Egyptians could have looked like by comparing their skeletal remains with those of recent populations, but the samples are so

limited and the interpretations so fraught with uncertainties that this is an unreliable approach.

Can we articulate any idea of what type of people we would have encountered when visiting ancient Egypt? I think we should stress the diversity of the people. The country's location at the edge of northeast Africa and its geography as a corridor between that continent and Asia opened it up to influences from all directions, in terms both of culture and of demography. The processes of acculturation, intermarriage, and so on probably differed according to community and over time. People must have preserved some of their ancestors' physique and lifestyles, and the degree to which they merged with neighbors with different backgrounds must have been variable. We cannot imagine an Egyptian population that was of uniform appearance. But somehow all these people at times saw themselves as Egyptians, different from people from the neighboring countries, and it is their common history we will explore.

1.2 Egypt's Geography

The Nile River

The Nile dictates how we can study the ancient Egyptians, and in many other respects the river shapes Egypt. Running through the eastern end of the Sahara desert, it essentially forms a long oasis. Wherever its water reaches the soil can be farmed; where it does not reach the earth is parched and it is impossible to grow anything on it. The contrast is so stark that one can stand with one foot in lush greenery and with the other in lifeless desert. The ancient Egyptians called the fertile area "the black land," the desert "the red land."

The Nile is the longest river on earth: some of its sources are located south of the equator and it runs for more than

4,000 miles (6,500 kilometers) northwards to empty into the Mediterranean Sea. In Egypt it has two distinct parts. The upstream part in the south, Upper Egypt, flows through a valley between 5 and 10 miles wide that is lined by cliffs restricting its course. Upper Egypt stretches for some 600 miles from modern Aswan to Cairo, located at a natural obstruction in the river that we call the first cataract. There are six numbered cataracts on the Nile, one in modern Egypt and five in modern Sudan. Cataracts are where the river is very shallow and rocky islands and boulders obstruct the water flow. These zones of narrow channels and rapids make navigation difficult and dangerous and consequently they constitute clear natural boundaries. Throughout ancient history the northernmost first cataract made up the southern border of Egypt's heartland and anything south of it was usually considered a different country. South of Aswan the Nile Valley is very narrow and it is only upstream of the third cataract that it is broad enough to include fields that allow sufficient farming to support substantial settled communities.

North of Cairo, the river's course is radically different. No longer enclosed by cliffs it spreads out into a huge triangle, which we call the Delta, with multiple branches. Because of its location downstream, the region is called Lower Egypt, bordering the Mediterranean Sea. The eastern-and westernmost points of the Delta are 150 miles (250 kilometers) apart, and the shortest distance between Cairo and the sea is 100 miles (160 kilometers).

All agricultural land in Egypt is made up of silt that the river annually deposited during its flood, prior to the construction of the Aswan dam. The river's water derives from three main sources. The White Nile, which originates in Central Africa, is most constant in its flow and does not carry much silt. But two tributary rivers, the Blue Nile and the Atbara that stem from the Ethiopian highlands, bring a

sudden influx of water from heavy summer rains and both carry lots of silt. In Egypt the Nile is at its lowest level in the months of May and June and starts to rise in July because of rain in Ethiopia. It reaches its highest point in mid-September and recedes by mid-October (Figure 1.2). Its timing is in perfect harmony with the agricultural cycle, which makes farming in Egypt much less complex than in nearby regions and almost always guarantees that the population's needs are satisfied.

At one point in Upper Egypt the river water escapes the valley to flow into a large natural depression to its west, the Fayyum. From early prehistory on the accumulated water allowed for farming along the edges and, starting in the early second millennium, state initiatives tried to extend the agricultural zone by diverting the water into canals and controlling its flow. In the Ptolemaic and Roman periods these projects were very successful and the Fayyum became the breadbasket for Egypt and beyond.

The desert

The areas outside the reach of the Nile flood are arid desert. West of the Nile stretches out the Sahara, mostly uninhabitable but for its northern fringe along the Mediterranean Sea. In the vast desert plateau are some depressions where underground water surfaces to form oases (through Greek and Latin the English term derives from the Egyptian word *ouhat*). Up to 250 miles (400 kilometers) west of the valley they constitute places that the Egyptians controlled and settled, sometimes with penal colonies. Routes between the oases made it possible to travel from north to south avoiding the Nile Valley. The eastern desert is much less extensive as it borders the Red Sea some 60 to 200 miles (95 to 320 kilometers) east of the Nile. In Egypt its northern part is a hilly plateau, while the southern part contains high mountains that are difficult to

cross. Dry riverbeds, wadis in Arabic, cut through these mountains, however, and make travel from the Nile to the Red Sea possible, although water is in short supply from wells only.



Figure 1.2 The Nile in flood near the Giza pyramids on October 31, 1927, before the building of the Aswan dams. Photograph by Mohammedani Ibrahim, Harvard University – Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. Photograph © 2010 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Under current climatic conditions the eastern and western deserts cannot support any farming and even the nomadic herding of animals is difficult. The eastern desert was a source of metals, including gold and hard stones, however, and thus of great interest to the Egyptians. East of the Delta the eastern desert leads into Asia, across the modern Suez Canal. The Sinai Desert to its east is mostly very inhospitable and some parts of it contain high desolate mountains. Travel through Sinai is limited to routes along

the Mediterranean coast. The region contains some very desirable resources, such as copper and the semi-precious turquoise stone. Although Sinai formed a buffer between Egypt and Asiatic states, it was always in Egypt's orbit.

Climate

With its location just north of the Tropic of Cancer, Egypt is hot, especially in the summer, when average temperatures in Aswan easily reach 40 degrees Celsius. The country also receives very little rain and none of it in the summer. The current conditions did not always exist, however. Before the late third millennium bc, the climate was wetter and enabled people to live outside the valley collecting wild resources and doing some farming. The environment of Egypt in prehistory and early history was thus different from that in the later historical period and for the earliest developments scholars have to look beyond the valley to understand what went on.

Frontiers and links

Hemmed in by deserts and the sea, Egypt has a degree of isolation many other countries lack. In the west access is mainly restricted to a narrow strip along the coast, in the east the high desert separates it from the Red Sea coast. The Mediterranean coast was also a frontier and no harbor is known on it before the first millennium bc . Previously, boats had to sail inland before they could anchor. The first cataract delineated Egypt's southern border on the Nile. Traffic in and out of the country was thus easy to control and from early on kings established border posts at the first cataract and on the eastern and western points of the Delta to monitor it.

On the other hand, by its very location Egypt was at a crossroads. Any overland movement between Africa and

Asia had to pass through it. Thus early hominids from Africa crossed Egypt during their migration across the globe, while in the Middle Ages and later Egypt was the bridge between the heartland of the Islamic empires and their North African possessions. Through the Mediterranean, Egypt was connected by sea to southern Europe. In the late second millennium bc, ships sailing along the eastern Mediterranean coast went from Egypt to Greece and the Aegean islands passing by the Syrian coast. In later times overseas traffic between Egypt and Europe was intense, with huge cargo ships securing Rome's grain supply. The ancient Egyptians liked to portray themselves as separate from the rest of the world, with a long local pedigree and immune from outside interference, but that was a false image. Throughout its history Egypt was exposed to external influences as foreigners were drawn to the country. The longevity of ancient Egyptian culture was partly due to the readiness of others to absorb it.

1.3 The Makeup of Egyptian Historical Sources

Anyone with an interest in ancient Egypt is aware of the mass of material that is available to a student of the culture. Many museums have an abundance of objects on display, numerous TV documentaries show a seemingly unlimited array of buildings, wall paintings, statues, and the like, and whoever travels to Egypt itself sees ancient remains almost everywhere. Writing is very prominent in all this material: the ancient Egyptians liked to carve and paint texts onto their monuments. A major temple was incomplete if it did not have texts and images on every surface. A project ongoing since the 1920s continues to track where inscriptions are located and what scholars have published them. The catalogue is not yet finished. [1](#)

This embarrassment of riches does not mean that every aspect of life is well documented, however, or that the sources are easy to use in historical research. Nor are they evenly spread over the millennia of Egyptian history. As I take writing as the historian's primary source, I will focus my remarks here on the written record.

Papyri and ostraca

The papyrus is almost as iconic of ancient Egypt as is the pyramid. The paper-like – the words are obviously related – sheets of plant-fibers hammered together are fragile and would not have survived were it not for Egypt's dry climate. The survival of papyri depends on where they ended up after use. Undoubtedly the ancient Egyptians kept business records and accounts in their houses and offices in towns and villages. Those were situated in the floodplain and consequently are now submerged underneath Nile deposit. Even if one could excavate the buildings where the papyri were stored, the humidity would have destroyed them. Likewise, there are few papyri from the Delta. The large majority of finds derives from the desert areas, where people included papyri in tombs or, more rarely, from administrative offices near burial complexes. In the Ptolemaic Period large amounts papyri were also used to enclose mummies in what we call cartonnage. The artisans bought them up in bulk to make a kind of papier-mâché coffin surrounding human and animal corpses, and mixed all sorts of writings together. These have survived because they were buried in the desert.

Papyrus was expensive. People regularly reused rolls, writing on the reverse and in spaces left blank in the midst of a text. They combined thus writings with very different content. We find, for example, magical spells written on the back of a papyrus with administrative records. This repeated use can lead to confusion; when various

documents appear side-by-side but written over several decades do they relate to each other or are they fully independent? For daily purposes the Egyptians also used other materials that were cheap and abundant. Those included primarily the shards of broken pots and flat chippings of limestone on whose surfaces one could write in ink. Scholars refer to them as ostraca, from the Greek word for potshard, ostrakon (Figure 1.3). Most often they contain brief business documents, but can have much more elaborate writing on them. For example, someone copied most of the literary *Tale of Sinuhe* on a limestone flake, 35 inches (88.5 cm) high with 130 lines of text on it. Many ostraca contain sketches that often reveal an artistic spontaneity that is absent in official monuments.

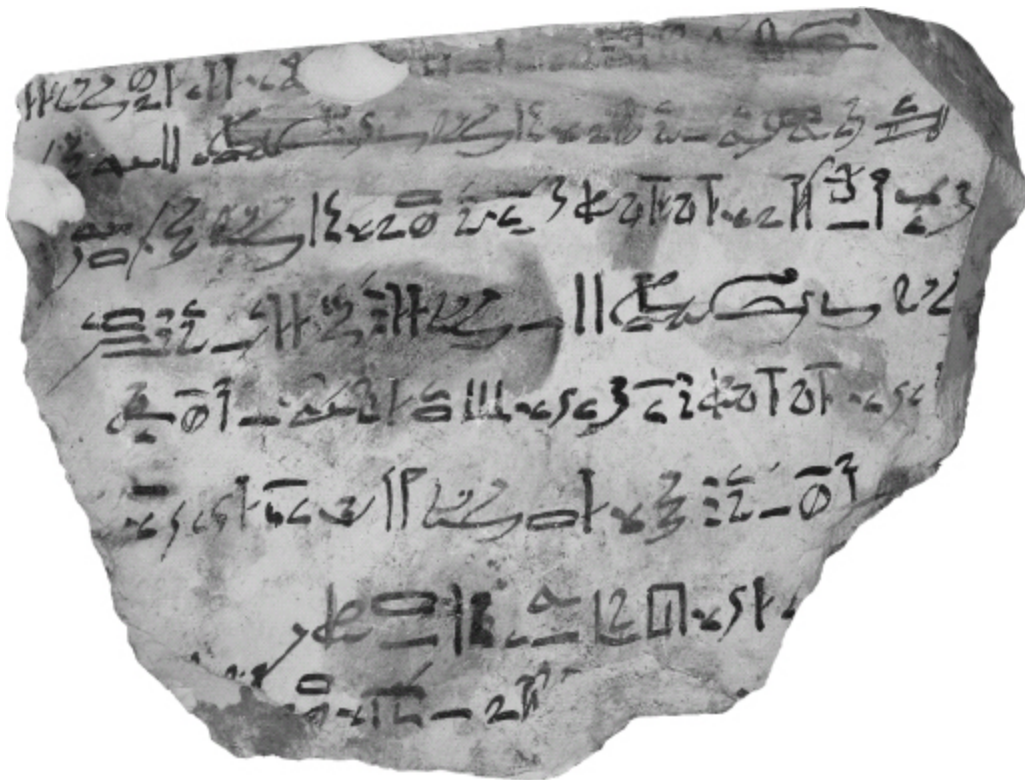


Figure 1.3 Example of an ostrakon from the late 19th dynasty. akg-images/Erich Lessing

Because of the problems of conservation over time, the record of papyri and ostraca available today is not an

accurate reflection of what was written in antiquity. Only the materials that were kept in the desert survive, and those deal primarily with issues concerning the dead. If they are administrative, they often record the mortuary cult. Some archives recording the private affairs of people survived by accident by being discarded in desert tombs.

Literary works likewise survived when they were deposited in burials. Funerary compilations such as the Book of the Dead are thus more likely still to exist than other literature. An exceptional community of artists and workmen who built the tombs in the Valley of the Kings lived in the desert at modern Deir el-Medina. For those people we have the remains of their everyday writings and they are extensive and wide-ranging. Beside papyri more than 10,000 ostraca were excavated in the village. The writings include letters, business contracts, and accounts, but also a good number of excerpts of literary texts. Although this was an unusual community, with especially literate members, the documents probably reveal what would have been available elsewhere in Egypt. Some towns and villages from the Greek and Roman periods are the source of papyri, but these were almost all excavated unscientifically in the early days of Egyptian archaeology. Together with the official state records that make up the mass of papyri used in mummy cartonnage, they give a more complete picture of ancient writings than for earlier periods.

Monumental inscriptions

The most visible remains of Egyptian writing are on monuments, the buildings, statues, steles, and coffins that are so numerous and evident in museums and in the Egyptian countryside. These are most often official statements, honoring the donor of the monument or celebrating a military adventure, the construction of a building, or similar public accomplishments. The

integration of text and image, jointly proclaiming a message, is greater in Egypt than in most other cultures. A statue, for example, is almost incomplete without the written name of whom it represents. Conversely, the statue itself can serve as a hieroglyph of writing. The inscribed name is carved in such a way that the figure of the statue appears at the end. In the Egyptian writing system a person's name needs to be followed by the determinative signifying a man or a woman. With male statues the sculpture itself often performs that function.

Historical criticism

Official statements require a skeptical reading. One of the hardest tasks for the scholar of ancient Egypt is to subject the textual record to historical criticism. Often a single source, or a set that presents the same point of view, provides the only information on an event or a practice. It is thus difficult to ascertain whether the outcome of a military campaign was as glorious as the author proclaims or even whether the campaign took place. In other fields of historical research the rule that a single testimony is no testimony is often invoked, but this attitude would leave ancient Egyptian history in tatters, as often we have to rely on one source only. Historians need to use great caution. They cannot just accumulate individual statements about a king's reign and present them as a reconstruction of the period.

A particular challenge arises with the use in historical reconstructions of what are clearly literary compositions. The Egyptians did not produce accounts that professed to be accurate investigations of the past. They did write stories, however, portraying historical figures. For example, in a Middle Kingdom piece of wisdom literature, *The Instruction Addressed to King Merykara* (see Chapter 4), Merykara, a known ruler of the preceding First

Intermediate Period, hears a description of troubles and military action against internal Egyptian and foreign enemies. It is tempting to accept this narrative as fact and use it as an explanation of an otherwise documented decline of royal power in the First Intermediate Period. But the literary source was not written in order to explain history to a later audience. Its purpose was to inspire royal and elite conduct that could deal with adversity, and the challenges described may have been purely fictional. In earlier years of Egyptian scholarship the narrative was taken at face value, but today scholars use the *Instruction* as a source of information on the period of its composition, rather than on the period it depicts. The study of the First Intermediate Period needs to be based on other evidence.

1.4 The Egyptians and Their Past

Stories like *The Instruction Addressed to King Merykara* show that the Egyptians had a knowledge about their past and that they knew who had ruled the country in earlier times. This is not surprising, of course, as they could see ancient monuments and writings as we do today. But especially in the Late Period, in the first millennium bc, the past also had a special status, giving authority and prestige. King Shabaqo of the eighth century, for example, had a narrative about creation carved on a stone slab claiming that it was a copy made from a worm-eaten papyrus. The author of the text, *The Memphite Theology*, used a language modeled on that of the Old Kingdom, but it is most likely that the text was of much later date and was presented as ancient to give it greater clout. In the first millennium bc as well, people had their tombs decorated with imitations of scenes from third millennium tombs, carefully copying the ancient styles.

King lists

The prestige of antiquity especially applied to the office of kingship. All kings of Egypt were part of a lengthy sequence of universal rulers that went back to the start of history and even before. The Egyptians expressed this concept clearly in what we call king lists, a set of documents from the entirety of Egyptian history, which did not all have the same function in antiquity. The group of documents that survived is small and includes mostly fragmentary records. More material is bound to appear; very recently a scholar recognized a piece of a list written in Demotic during the late Ptolemaic Period in a collection of papyrus scraps.

Around 1290, King Sety I of the 19th dynasty had himself depicted with crown prince Rameses, to become Rameses II, on the walls of the temple at Abydos. The scene shows them giving offerings to a long line of 75 predecessors, each one represented by a cartouche, arranged in correct chronological order. The list is not complete, but edits history to remove discredited rulers, such as the foreign Hyksos and five kings of the 18th dynasty, which had ended in Sety's youth. The 18th-dynasty rulers omitted were Queen Hatshepsut, whose joint reign with Thutmose III was anathema to the idea of exclusive rule, and the four kings associated with the so-called Amarna revolution. A list comparable to Sety's, now damaged, stood in Rameses II's temple at Abydos (Figure [1.4](#)), and a somewhat earlier representation at Karnak shows King Thutmose III making offerings to the statues of 61 predecessors, not in chronological order.



Figure 1.4 Fragmentary king list from the temple of Rameses II at Abydos. Werner Forman Archive/British Museum, London

Non-royal people could also honor past kings. In his tomb decoration at Saqqara an official of Rameses II depicted the cartouches of 57 kings from the first to the 19th dynasty in correct order, but for the inversion of the 11th and 12th dynasties. A tomb in Thebes shows the priest Amenmose making offerings to the statues of 12 kings, including all those then considered legitimate kings of the 18th dynasty (as well as the queen of the dynasty's founder) and one of the Middle Kingdom. These lists are all evidence of a cult for royal ancestors, and they show knowledge of the names of past rulers and their correct sequence, although there was no attempt to depict them all.

Sety's list at Abydos starts with Menes, then considered the original unifier of Egypt, but kingship did not begin with

Menes in Egyptian opinion. The Palermo Stone, a monument whose fragments are spread over several museums, lists predecessors of the kings of unified Egypt: first men wearing a crown later associated with Lower Egypt, then men wearing a crown later associated with Upper Egypt. For what we call the historical period the stone provides year-by-year annals, giving rulers' names and short entries on a special event for each year, as well as a measurement of the Nile's inundation height that year. The list ends in the 5th dynasty, which may have been when the stone was carved, although some scholars suggest that it dates much later.

The two longest and most complete king lists from Egypt take the concept of kingship even further back in time. The Turin King List and Manetho's *History of Egypt* start their lists with gods, who ruled for thousands of years. The sequence they provide reflects ideas of creation and the struggles between Horus and Seth that appear in other sources. After the great gods came lesser gods and assorted creatures, such as spirits, until Menes emerged as the first historic ruler. These lists assert thus that kingship arose at the time of creation.

Both the Turin King List and Manetho's *History of Egypt* attempt to give a full chronicle of Egyptian kingship including the names of all rulers and the length of their reigns. The list now in the museum of Turin, Italy, is a lengthy papyrus from the 13th century bc, which scholars often call the Turin Royal Canon. It allegedly was complete when discovered in the early 19th century, but is now in many pieces. It lists some 300 names of kings, from Menes to the end of the 17th dynasty, sometimes giving the time they ruled to the day. The list does not sanitize history and includes the despised Hyksos kings. At times it sums up, for example, 955 years and 10 days from Menes to the end of

the 8th dynasty, which shows a concern to subdivide the long sequence of rulers.

The idea of subdivision is fully developed in the final, and today most influential, king list of Egypt. In the third century bc an Egyptian priest, Manetho, wrote a history of his country in the Greek language, the *Aegyptiaca* or *History of Egypt* (see Chapter 13). Preserved only in quotations and paraphrases of later authors, it attempted to account for Egypt's history with a king list into which Manetho inserted narratives. The latter often recall earlier stories about Egyptian rulers and show that Manetho had access to writings now lost. The long king list was a massive reconstruction of the names of rulers and the length of their reigns. For periods when power in Egypt was centralized Manetho lists individual royal names; when it was diffuse he often mentions only the number of kings, their capital, and the total number of years they ruled. His list includes all rulers from Menes to the last king whom Alexander defeated in 332 bc, the Persian Darius III.

The most influential feature of Manetho's organization was his division of the list of kings into "dynasties." He was the first to use this Greek term for a group of rulers in order to designate a succession of kings who shared common attributes, mostly that they represented several generations of a family. He broke the long sequence of rulers up into 31 dynasties. ³ His sections for each dynasty start with the number of kings and the capital city. Then he lists the names of individual rulers and numbers of years, and at the end he sums up the total number of years. For example: