Ancient civilization, based around the River Nile in Egypt, which emerged 5,000 years ago and reached its peak in the 16th century BC. Ancient Egypt was famed for its great power and wealth, due to the highly fertile lands of the Nile delta, which were rich sources of grain for the whole Mediterranean region. Egyptians were advanced in agriculture, engineering, and applied sciences. Many of their monuments, such as the pyramids and the sphinx, survive today.

**Agriculture** The Egyptians lived by farming the banks of the Nile. Corn, vegetables, date-palms, and grapevines were grown, and bread and beer were staple food and drink. To increase output, they constructed canals, dykes, and dams for irrigation. They also studied the seasons and calculated that the year contained 365 days. Trade was carried out by barter, as there was no coinage, and external trade remained in the hands of foreigners.

**Government** Developing in virtual isolation, surrounded by deserts and seas, ancient Egypt was the world’s first nation state. The king, or pharaoh, was regarded as a god, and his will was absolute. The kingdom was divided into administrative districts (called nomes) each headed by a governor (nomarch), and a hierarchy of nobles, priests, and scribes supervised agriculture and trade.

**Religion** Ra, the sun god, and Osiris, god of the dead, were the chief deities, but many gods were believed to control birth and death and various aspects of everyday life. The gods were depicted with the heads of the animals sacred to them. The hawk was sacred to Ra and Horus, the ibis to Thoth, and the jackal to Anubis. Later the local deity of Thebes, Ammon, became supreme as Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands, a symbol of national unity. Immortality was originally the preserve of the pharaohs, but under the New Kingdom all who could afford mummification could achieve it.

**Tombs** Much of our evidence of ancient Egyptian life derives from tombs, since the dead were buried with everything necessary to maintain their standard of living in the afterworld. The quality of royal statues, jewellery, ornaments, and furniture was very fine. The walls of tombs were painted with detailed scenes (in a highly distinctive two-dimensional style) and inscribed with extracts from religious books. Knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics was lost by c. 500 AD, but they have been deciphered by means of the Rosetta Stone. Egyptian literature included mythological and historical tales, poetry, and moral essays. The most famous surviving examples are ‘The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor’ and ‘The Tale of the Two Brothers’.

**Architecture** The pyramids were tombs of the pharaohs, and the shape of these enormous structures is probably connected with the belief that the dead pharaoh ascended to the sky to merge with the sun god. Egyptian architects built on a grand scale and developed geometry and trigonometry for use in surveying. Early buildings, like the pyramids, were made of solid stone blocks accurately positioned. Later buildings, like the temples of Luxor and Karnak at Thebes, had massive lintels supported by tall columns.
History  Ancient Egyptian history is divided into 31 royal dynasties, usually grouped in eight periods.

For a more detailed account of ancient Egyptian history, see Egypt, ancient: history.

**Archaic period** (1st–2nd dynasties)  Menes, the first pharaoh, united Lower Egypt (the Nile delta) with Upper Egypt (the Nile valley) to form one long narrow kingdom with a capital at Memphis c. 3050 BC. Religion and administration took on the forms that later became established.

**Old Kingdom** (3rd–6th dynasties)  The architect Imhotep built the step pyramid at Sakkara c. 2630 BC for pharaoh Zoser. The pharaohs of the 4th dynasty constructed the pyramids of El Gîza, which culminated in the massive Great Pyramid of the pharaoh Khufu (Cheops) c. 2550 BC. At the end of the 6th dynasty, pharaoh Pepi II reputedly reigned for nearly a century, but he gradually lost control of the kingdom, as the nomarchs increasingly became independent hereditary rulers.

**First intermediate period** (7th–10th dynasties)  Egypt broke up into several minor kingdoms amid civil war and famine. After a century of obscure disorder, the kingdom of Thebes began to reunite the country from c. 2100 BC.

**Middle Kingdom** (11th–12th dynasties)  Pharaoh Mentuhotep II completed the reunion of Egypt and suppressed the hereditary nomarchs c. 2000 BC. The kingdom expanded and the arts revived. In the 12th dynasty, the oasis of Fayum, west of the Nile, was irrigated and turned into the ‘Garden of Egypt’.

**Second intermediate period** (13th–17th dynasties)  Egypt suffered another dark age of anarchy and disintegration. The Hyksos, a people from southwest Asia, settled in the Nile delta from c. 1750 BC and dominated the country for about 100 years.

**New Kingdom** (18th–20th dynasties)  Pharaoh Ahmose finally drove the Hyksos out of Egypt c. 1550 BC and established a new capital at Thebes. Under his successors, Egyptian civilization reached its zenith. The kingdom expanded eastwards into Asia as far as the River Euphrates and grand temples were built throughout the Nile valley. Pharaoh Akhenaton (1353–1335 BC) tried and failed to reform religion. The Hittites attacked Egyptian lands in Asia, and pharaoh Ramses II the Great (1279–1213 BC) fought a long and bitter war against them. The power of Egypt began to decline, but Ramses III (1187–1156 BC) defeated an invasion by the Indo-European ‘peoples of the sea’. Later in the 20th dynasty effective authority passed from the pharaohs to the priests of Ammon.

**Third intermediate period** (21st–23rd dynasties)  In the 21st dynasty, there were rival pharaohs based at Thebes and Tanis until Egypt was reunified under pharaoh Psusennes II. When he died 945 BC, a Libyan family seized power. There followed 150 years of violent struggle between the priests of Ammon and rival Libyan chieftains.

**Late period** (24th–31st dynasties)  Egypt was reunited by the Nubian kingdom of the Kushites, but then invaded by Assyria, which occupied Thebes 666 BC. Independence was regained by the 26th dynasty, but the Persians occupied Egypt 525–405 BC. The ancient empires wanted possession of the fertile Nile delta, known as ‘the breadbasket of the Mediterranean’. Distinctive Egyptian civilization was overlaid by foreign cultures. The last native pharaoh, Nectanebos II, was driven out by the Persians 343 BC.

In 332 BC Alexander the Great of Macedon conquered Egypt and created a new capital at Alexandria. His general, Ptolemy, founded the Ptolemaic or Macedonian dynasty, which ended with the death of Cleopatra 30 BC. Egypt then became a province of the Roman Empire.

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