

E. Our Connection to Archaic Egypt

1. Although archaic cultures do not have a direct influence on us, our desire to know more about ourselves leads us to want to uncover the mysteries of early human life as well.
2. For thousands of years, the mysteries of archaic Egypt fascinated people. They sailed up the Nile river, past the pyramids and the sphinx, to vast temples and tombs, finding many exotic artifacts (such as pottery, tools, weapons, and sarcophaguses). Anyone with a sense of curiosity and adventure would want to know more.
3. European historians had developed a specialized study called “archeology”—the study of *archaic* human cultures—but archeology could only collect, catalog, describe and interpret the meaning of artifacts. It could not tell the story of the people who had made them. There was an insurmountable barrier standing between historians and the *history* of archaic Egypt. The Egyptian form of writing found in all the temples and on many artifacts—a kind of picture-writing called “hieroglyphics”—was unreadable.
4. In 1798, a French general named Napoleon conquered Egypt as part of a war against France’s European neighbors, including Britain. Britain controlled most of India at this time, and Napoleon hoped to march from Egypt over land to India and take it from Britain.
5. Napoleon was not merely a conqueror. He was also interested in subjects like history. Thus, on his expedition to Egypt he brought hundreds of archeologists and historians. He wanted to give them an opportunity to learn more about the mysteries of archaic Egypt.
6. In 1799, while digging to build a fort at a place called “Rashid” in Egypt, or what the English later called “Rosetta,” the French found a *stele*—a flat stone slab—inscribed with text that would ultimately permit the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics.
7. French historians were thrilled with the discovery because the stele contained three forms of writing: ancient Greek, Demotic (another kind of Egyptian writing), and hieroglyphics. Since modern historians still knew how to read Greek, they could use the Greek text to help them decipher the other two languages.
8. There were two keys to deciphering the Rosetta Stone.
 - a) The basic method or approach was to look for repeating words or letters in the Greek text, and find those same words in the hieroglyphic text.
 - b) This approach was supplemented by a discovery made by young French historian named Jean-Francois Champollion that when written in hieroglyph form *proper names of kings* are encapsulated by an elliptical outline—a “cartouche.”
9. Champollion made the most important advances in the translation, offering the first key to hieroglyphics in 1822.

F. Egyptology

1. Once historians learned how to read hieroglyphics, the work of collecting, translating, and publishing ancient sources, and then of putting them together into a single story of Egypt began.
2. This difficult task became the work of specialists known as Egyptologists.
3. Thanks to the work of Egyptologists over the past 200 years, we now know more about archaic Egypt than ever before.
4. The breakthrough that was the discovery and translation of the Rosetta Stone is thus another anchoring milestone in the study of ancient history. Without it we would not even have to contend with the question of the importance of the history of archaic cultures.

G. 3000 BC - As Far Back As We Can See

1. Very little is known of the early history of Egypt because too few documents exist to explain its story. Nonetheless, historians know that a single country was formed thanks to a ruler and conqueror sometimes known as Menes and at other times as Narmer.
2. A key piece of evidence concerning the unification of Egypt is the Narmer Palette, found at a tomb in Abydos (see *Geography, Week 1*)
 - a) The Narmer Palette is a two-sided stone tablet with the depiction of the deeds of the great conqueror “Narmer.”
 - b) It depicts him as the king of Upper Egypt (wearing a helmet shaped like a modern bowling pin) defeating his enemy, and becoming the king of Lower Egypt (wearing a helmet with a decorative curly cue in the front) as well.
 - c) Narmer’s enemies are shown lying dead in great numbers, or marching before him.
 - d) Symbols representing the Nile (a living creature, with papyrus flowers coming out of it) and Egyptian gods (Horus, as a falcon), accompany the main figure. Two giant “serpopards” (serpent leopards) link together on the opposite side of the palette, representing the unification of Egypt.
3. Based on the translation of the palette’s hieroglyphics, historians believe it represents the story of the legendary first pharaoh of Egypt that the Greeks called “Menes.” Later documents refer to him as “Narmer.” To draw the connection between the two, this character is referred to in HistoryAtOurHouse classes as “Menes/Narmer.”