

Part 2: Archaic Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia

I. Archaic Egypt

No people in history are better represented by a single symbol than the ancient Egyptians and their pyramids. To understand the pyramids is to understand the Egyptians and their place in history—including the reason why Egypt's is an *archaic* culture, not a classical one. The study of ancient Egyptian history begins and ends with one colossal “anchor fact:” the pyramids.

A. Egypt: The Land of the Pyramid Builders

1. The Tombs of the Pharaohs

- a) As is now well known, the pyramids were tombs for “pharaohs” (kings of Egypt) and a few other important people (such as their queens).
- b) The tombs held the mummified remains of the pharaoh, whose “ka” (spirit) was believed to continue living after the death of the body.
- c) The Egyptians believed that if a pharaoh's body was properly cared for and preserved after death, the pharaoh's “ka” would ascend to the heavens and protect Egypt by working with the other gods in the maintenance of the natural order of Egypt.

2. The Pyramids as Religious Monuments

- a) Why build tombs so large? In addition to serving as tombs, the pyramids were *monuments*.
- b) They were built so large to be a constant reminder of the religious belief in the connection between the supernatural and the natural worlds—specifically, the *dependence* of the natural world on the supernatural.
- c) By symbolizing this belief in such impressive fashion they helped maintain the worldly power of the pharaohs. They acted as a constant reminder to the people of the power of the pharaohs, and a spur to religious observance, so that the gods would always be willing to help Egypt.

B. Life on the Nile

1. Why did the Egyptians believe that life in Egypt depended on god-kings?

- a) Egypt is almost entirely an inhospitable desert. There is, however, a narrow, serpent-shaped oasis that runs through this desert. It is the flood plain of the Nile. As if the case in other such special locations around the world, a river generated just the right conditions to allow a primitive civilization to flourish.
- b) Specifically, in ancient times, the Nile would flood every year, once a year, bringing the extra water and soil needed to grow crops. (In modern times, flood control and irrigation are provided by the Aswan Dam, a modern marvel that provides not only water, but also electrical power, to Egypt.)
- c) Since the Nile provided such a wonderful environment for the Egyptians, the

ancient Greek historian Herodotus called the country “the gift of the Nile.”

- d) To the Egyptians, this figurative “gift” was a literal gift—*from the gods*. Having no scientific knowledge of nature (such as the scientific study of the weather, called “meteorology”), the Egyptians were superstitious about the powers of nature. They believed that a great family of supernatural powers controlled the flooding of the Nile, and thus controlled the quality of life in Egypt.

C. The Nile and the Rule of the Pharaohs

1. As a dynastic succession of rulers following Menes/Narmer, the pharaohs had a great army to control other people’s lives, but there is always a fine line between ruling and tyranny.
2. A ruler like Menes/Narmer could use his army to conquer Lower Egypt, but if he ruled too harshly, the people of Lower Egypt would rebel against him, as people would do in every culture throughout the thousands of years of recorded history. (See, of course, the greatest example—our cardinal anchor fact—the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, as part of the revolution overthrowing the tyranny of King George III of England.)
3. Because Nile flooding was the determining factor in the amount of food that the Egyptians could grow, it also determined how the pharaohs ruled Egypt.
4. By means of “Nilometers,” the government could track the height of the water during the flood season.
5. If flood levels were good (the reasoning went) then the people could afford higher taxes (in the form of grain and other produce). If the flooding was poor, then the government could choose to lower taxes, to reflect the fact that people could not afford as much that year.
6. Did the Pharaohs control the Nile as gods? Of course not! The “Nilometers” show us that they knew they had no power to control nature. All they could do was adapt themselves to it. But by being careful to respect the importance of the Nile in Egyptian life, they could avoid being too great a burden on the people through taxes, and thus avoid rebellions. (Put another way, one could say, in order to maintain a pharaoh-centric society, the pharaohs themselves had to acknowledge that Egyptian life was “Nilo-centric”!)

D. Pharaonic Government

1. The God-Kings
 - a) The pharaoh was believed to be a god, but while he lived on Earth he was obviously a man.

- b) The pharaohs thus had to live the life of a human being in such a way as to maintain the illusion of his god-hood and maintain his power. This was a difficult job!
- c) As human beings, pharaohs got sick. They might trip, and fall flat on their face just like anybody else! They and their children sometimes died. They did all the normal (and not at all godly) human things—like getting “boo boos” and potty-training!
- d) Because of their humanity, such “gods” needed to be kept separate from the people. The Pharaoh was rarely if at all seen by his people, because to be seen regularly would reveal too obviously his humanity. Instead, the pharaoh ventured out into Egypt on rare occasions to lead great religious ceremonies.
- e) Since the Pharaoh did not interact directly with all but a small group within the royal household and religious temples the practical matters of government were handled by other officials. This delegation of power created one of the main liabilities for the pharaonic system.