

## **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.

#### 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 “mummies” of the pharaohs.
- c) The Egyptians believed that if a pharaoh’s body was properly cared for and preserved after death, the pharaoh would ascend to the heavens and protect Egypt by working with the other gods.

##### 2. The Pyramids as Religious Monuments

- a) Why build tombs so large? The pyramids were not just tombs. They were *monuments*.
- b) They were built so large to be a constant reminder of the religious belief that the pharaohs protected Egypt after death.
- c) They helped to remind people to be religious by obeying the pharaohs, 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 desert. The land along the Nile, called the “flood plain,” is a near-perfect place to live.
- b) In ancient times, the Nile would flood every year, once a year, bringing the extra water and soil needed to grow crops.
- c) The Egyptians believed that the gods 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. Because Nile flooding determined how much food the Egyptians could grow, it also determined how the pharaohs ruled Egypt.
2. By means of “Nilometers,” the government could track the height of the water during the flood season.
3. 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.

4. By being careful to respect the importance of the Nile in Egyptian life, the pharaohs could avoid being too great a burden on the people through taxes, and thus avoid rebellions.

#### D. Egyptian 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) As human beings, pharaohs got sick. They might trip, and fall flat on their face! They and their children sometimes died. They did all the normal (and not very godly) human things—like getting “boo boos” and potty-training!
- c) Because of their humanity, the “gods” needed to be kept separate from the people, otherwise people would not believe they were gods! The pharaoh would only be seen by the people on rare occasions, such as great religious ceremonies.
- d) Since the Pharaoh did not interact directly with the people, somebody else had to actually take care of the practical matters of government. This meant that the pharaohs actually gave up their power to someone else!