

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

1. Very little is known of the early history of Egypt and Mesopotamia because too few documents exist to explain their story. Nonetheless, historians know that a single country was formed in Egypt 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, Egypt.
 - 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.”



The Narmer Palette depicts the conquest of “Lower Egypt” by Menes, a.k.a Narmer, the ruler of “Upper Egypt” (the man with the bowling pin helmet—the symbolic headdress of rulers of Upper Egypt) c.3000 BC. On the opposite side, he is seen wearing the crown of Lower Egypt—symbolizing unification, as he towers over a procession celebrating his victory. Among other symbols the intertwining of the serpent-leopards further contributes to the theme of unification.

C. River Valley Civilization, Part 1: Egypt

1. Egypt is almost entirely desert. There is, however, a narrow, serpent-shaped oasis that runs through this desert. It is the flood plain of the Nile. In ancient times, the Nile would flood every year, once a year, bringing the extra water and soil needed to grow crops.
2. Since the Nile provided such a wonderful environment for the Egyptians, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus called the country “the gift of the Nile.”
3. To the Egyptians, this “gift” was literally a 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.

D. The Nile and the Rule of the Pharaohs

1. As the rulers of Egypt 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.
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. 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.