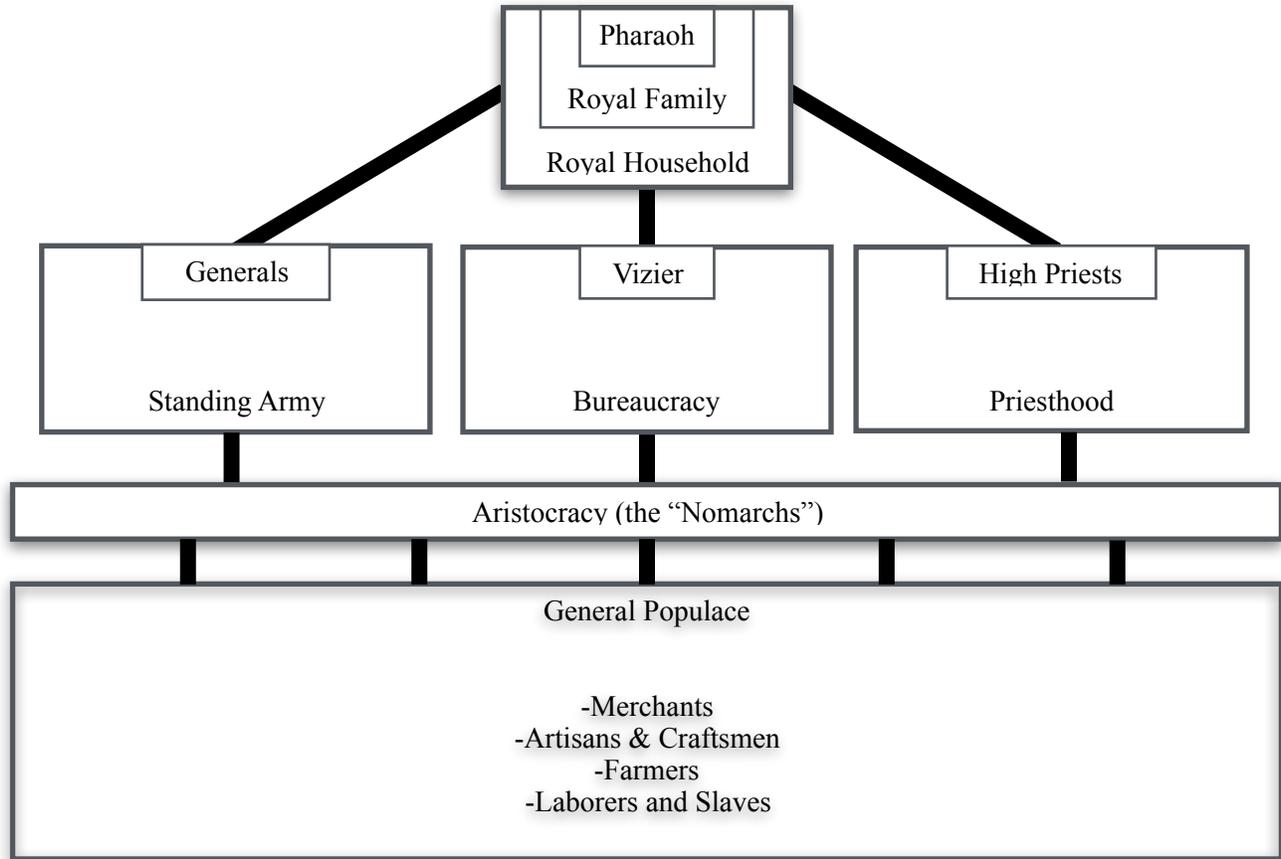


E. Pharaonic Government: Egypt's "Benevolent Despotism"

1. The pharaoh was believed to be a god, but while he lived on Earth he was obviously a man.
2. 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!
3. As human beings, pharaohs got sick. They might trip, and fall flat on their face! They and their children sometimes died in accidents or diseases. They did all the normal (and not very godly) human things—like getting “boo boos” and potty-training!
4. Because of their humanity, the “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.
5. 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, such as a “prime minister” known as a “vizier.”
6. The pharaoh’s authority was exercised by the vizier and other government officials, who transmitted the government’s edicts to the local leaders of Egyptian society, an aristocracy known in Egypt as the “nomarchs.” As elsewhere, this aristocracy was a group of wealth and power that considered itself the best among the local peoples. (“Aristos” means “best” in Greek, and the word “aristocracy” means the rule of the best.)
7. Also part of the the government were the army, some of which the pharaoh would have direct control of, but most of which would be commanded by generals or local commanders.
8. Finally, the Egyptian religion was headed by a priesthood also connected to the pharaohs, who performed religious ceremonies and interpreted the “will of the gods” for the people and organized the worship of both the gods and pharaohs.
9. The whole system was designed to be a *benevolent despotism* with a supernatural dimension, taking advantage of the ideal orderly, isolated environment provided by the Nile river flowing through the eastern Sahara desert. There was no better place for a ruler to claim that life was good *because* he was the ruler.
10. A diagram representing the structure of this benevolent despotism is provided on the next page.



F. The Three “Kingdom Periods” (The Cycles of Benevolent Despotism in Egypt)

1. After Menes/Narmer unified Egypt, the first extended period of pharaonic rule occurred, known as the “Old Kingdom.” It is also known as the “Age of Pyramids,” because it was during this time that pyramids were constructed as monument-tombs for pharaohs, to symbolize their supernatural benevolent despotism.
2. The pyramids of Giza were constructed c.2500 BC, at the “peak” of the *Age of Pyramids*.
3. A few centuries later, however, pharaohs simply stopped building pyramids. We don’t know exactly why, although the raiding of tombs was surely part of it, but in some sense the pyramids stopped “working.” Obviously, if people raided them—including pharaohs—then they did not symbolize a meaningful religion that the people actually believed.
4. The failure of this pyramid building culture is the end of the “Old Kingdom,” marked by rule of a pharaoh named Pepy II, who was a child king, and whose authority may have been undermined by those around him, causing the break-up of Egypt.
5. Egypt was reunited by pharaoh Montuhotep II, whose tomb was constructed in Upper Egypt.
6. The “Middle Kingdom” period started by Montuhotep does not have pyramids, but its form of benevolent despotism seems focused on public works, like the despotism of Yu “the Great” in China.

7. Pharaohs during the "Middle Kingdom" built canals to Lake Moeris (an oasis near the Nile) to increase agriculture, and a canal from the Red Sea to the Nile to increase trade.
8. Unfortunately, this also meant that Egypt had more contact with its neighbors, who were also becoming more established civilizations. This increased contact led to more trade, but also to conflicts, and to the repeated conquest of Egypt by other peoples.
9. The "Middle Kingdom" was ended by the invasion of a mysterious people called the "Hyksos," who occupied Lower Egypt. Egypt was again divided. It would be re-unified, as the "New Kingdom," but it never again had the same character as it had during the days of its pyramid building god-kings of old.

G. King Tut and the Failed Egyptian Reformation of the "New Kingdom"

1. With the worship of the god-kings having essentially died off, the people of Egypt now more concerned with their belief in their own personal afterlife. Normal people had more and more elaborate tombs, and a newly popular text known as "The Book of the Dead" promoted the idea that the common man could navigate the afterlife.
2. King Tut's father, Amenhotep IV, decided to revive the idea of the pharaoh as the leader of Egyptian religion for all. To accomplish this he decided to rid Egyptian religion of all its many gods, and insist in the worship of the sun god, Aten, alone.
3. To bring about this change, he changed his name from Amenhotep (which includes the god name "Amen") to Akhenaten, which means "he who acts on behalf of the Aten".
4. He also moved his family to a new capital city, Akhetaten, stopped supporting the priests of the traditional religion in the previous capital city Thebes (in Upper Egypt), made all religious festivals other than those involving the Aten illegal, and ordered the army to seek out temples throughout the country and scratch out all references to unauthorized gods.
5. Akhenaten's changes angered the priests, and must have caused fear and confusion for the people (who must have sensed a danger in abandoning their trusted gods).
6. After he died, his religious changes were abandoned, which is shown by the fact that his son Tutankhaten is not known to us by that name. Instead we know his as Tutankhamen (which shows the reversal of the switch in god names).
7. King Tut died at only nineteen years of age, leading to much speculation about his death, especially because of the strange conflict of religion involving his father.

H. The Fall of Ancient Egypt

1. After the failure of the Egyptian Reformation, the main theme of Egyptian history is war—and more war.
2. Egypt was invaded by the "Sea Peoples," (a mysterious group that soon disappears), then the Assyrians, who temporarily controlled Mesopotamia also, the Babylonians after them, the Persians, and finally the Greeks, under the brilliant conqueror **Alexander the Great (r.336-323 BC)**, who also took over Mesopotamia.

3. This was the “beginning of the end” for Ancient Egypt as a culture, and for Egypt & Mesopotamia as a cultural block.
4. After Alexander, all the pharaohs of Egypt were Greek. *This is why* the Rosetta Stone contains Greek writing as well as Egyptian hieroglyphics.
5. Finally, the last Greek ruler of Egypt, Cleopatra, who temporarily allied with Julius Caesar and then Mark Anthony, was defeated by the first Roman Emperor, Octavian (later known as “Augustus”) and there were no more pharaohs.
6. Egyptian religion limped along as part of the Roman world, but even that disappeared when the great “jihad” (holy war) of the establishment of Islam as a world religion swept it aside following the rise of Islam in Arabia next door, **c. 622 AD.**