UNIT 8 EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION*

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8.1 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will study the Egyptian Civilization. After going through this Unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the sources for the study of Egyptian civilization;
- Explain the factors that led to the rise of this civilization;
- Identify the social, economic, legal and religious structure of this civilization; and
- Analyze the causes for the decline of the Egyptian civilization.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

The fertile lands of the Nile helped in the origin and growth of the Egyptian Civilization. Herodotus has termed Egypt as ‘the gift of Nile’. However, the Nile civilization was not the first civilization of Egypt. Settlements and human movements were recorded much before the rise of the Egyptian civilization. The Badarian graves form a major source for documenting the history of the pre-dynastic age. The Egyptian history before the Hellenistic (Ptolemaic) period c. 323-31 BCE is divided into dynasties with the prehistoric period c. 5000-3150 BCE mostly called ‘pre-dynastic’ period. The great civilization as we know, developed on the banks of the river Nile. The riverine regions provided settlements with sources of food, resources and economic prosperity. The unification of the Upper and Lower Valley under the leadership of Pharaoh Menes in the early

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dynastic period led to the development of the great civilization. The Egyptian Civilization can be divided into three historical periods — the Old Kingdom (c. 2649-2040 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040-1550 BCE) and the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1070 BCE) (Kennet, 2008: 5-6).

8.3 PRE-DYNASTIC EGYPT

Before the advent of agriculture, Egyptians lived a peripatetic life based on the collection of seasonal resources. These resources were collected in storage bins which according to archaeologists sowed the seeds of the future Egyptian civilization. The storage bins first discovered in 1920s could have held 800 weights of cereals, mixed mostly of wild seed, emmer wheat and two and six-rowed barley, crops that with a low yield would have required two to three acres of land to fill a single bin. The seeds were mostly planted in October and November before the onset of the winter and they ripened during the following months of growth and maturation.

The lack of evidence from the pre-dynastic period fails to give a complete picture of the period. The graves discovered from Lower Egyptian sites indicate an egalitarian society based on family units. In Lower Egyptian sites social uniformity is not displayed. The small village of Merimde (c.4300-3800 BCE) mostly consisted of small family units engaged in farming, while the occupants of Fayum A (c.4600-c.4000) mostly participated in hunting and gathering.

Unlike the Lower Egyptian belt, the Upper Egyptian belt indicates social hierarchies as early as Badarian period (4500-3800 BCE). The Badarian graves show variation in their size and wealth indicating that different levels of status were accorded to the deceased (Wilkinson, 1999: 23, 25). Burial practices often reflect aspects of society and according to the graves discovered, certain individuals enjoyed higher positions and had more access to wealth and resources than the others.

As Egypt evolved towards statehood (approximately during the Early Dynastic Period, i.e. c. 3100-2686 BCE), social differences and hierarchies became more prominent in the mortuary evidence. The elites, for instance, were distinguished with enormous and architecturally ornamented graves containing large quantities of grave goods including pottery, metal tools, weapons and personal goods. By the end of the pre-dynastic era, local elites were able to monopolize the economic resources. The construction of massive tombs indicates the presence of enormous resources both in terms of labour and finances. The elites had the power to obtain goods through long distance trade and to employ skilled craftsmen in the

![Figure 8.1: Ushabti Figurine from Ancient Egyptian Tomb, circa 1260 BCE.](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Egyptian_Ushabti_Figure_of_Amen-em-ipet_Walters_22177.jpg)
construction of tombs and graves. The pre-dynastic era bore the seeds of the Egyptian state with its social differences, distribution of wealth and division of labour. The signs of hierarchies were already there.

### 8.4 THE RULE OF THE DYNASTIES

Unlike many ancient societies, Old dynasty left behind historical and archaeological sources. The historical sources especially those authored by the Greek historians and Manetho (an Egyptian priest) claim that the first Kings of Egypt had divine origins. Like many other early civilizations and ancient Kingdoms, the early Egyptian Kings called themselves ‘Shemsu’ or servants of the Gods. Menes is regarded as the first King of the First Dynasty (c. 2180-2040 BCE). The contemporary writings trace his origins from the ‘semi-divine spirits’. They, in turn, had been preceded by the Creator ‘Re’ (Frankfort, 1978:15).

Manetho’s writings serve as one of the most important frameworks for studying Egyptians Kings and Kingship. He described thirty dynasties of Kings from the unification of Egypt by Menes (c.3100/3000 BCE) to that of the conquest of Egypt by Alexander (332 BCE). The political and cultural impact of rule of Menes were enormous. Menes had played a crucial role in unifying Egypt. The rise of the First Dynasty brought along introduction of writing, by the technological advance of the large-scale use of metal tools. The introduction of metal tools like chisel helped in writing on stones and pyramids. This brought in permanent documentation as the previous form of writing on papyruss(form of a paper made from the stem of a water plant) did not have a durable life. The Egyptian kingship emerged from the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. The unification helped in the better utilization of resources and manpower required for the rise of the Egyptian Civilization.

The King’s name in the first three dynasties was not ornamental, and in visual depictions, the King’s name was surrounded within a façade (serekh) which was identified by the Horus, son of Goddess Osiris. The first two dynasties can be studied and differentiated to some extent from the subsequent period by the form and place of local burials (mastaba tombs at Abydos). The third dynasty witnessed the first step towards the construction of royal tombs in the form of pyramids and with their introduction, the royal cemetery site of earlier dynasties at Abydos ceased to be a burial ground. The first three dynasties are often known as the foundation stone of the Egyptian Civilization and are often also known as the Early Dynasty.

These were succeeded by the Old Kingdom, which includes Dynasties IV (c. 2613-2494 BCE) to Dynasties VIII (c. 2173-2160 BCE). From the Fourth Dynasty onwards, the royal names became more elaborate and the Kings’ name was encircled in a ‘cartouche’ whose oval shape symbolizes everything encircled by the sun. Chaos and confusion followed for next hundred years in the state system and is often known as the ‘First Intermediate Period’. It however ended by paving way for a strong central authority from the Ninth Dynasty (c.2160-2130 BCE). The phase between the Eleventh Dynasty to early Thirteenth Dynasty (c. 1803-1649 BCE) is known as the period of the Middle Kingdom. Earlier historians and archaeologists believed that between the first and the Middle dynasties, structural changes had occurred in the Egyptian civilization. This notion has changed vastly with the current discoveries and studies. Historians now believe that although there were definite changes in the Egyptian society and economy with the introduction of new technologies and complexity of administration in the period of the Middle Kingdom, but signs of continuity from the Early to the Middle dynasties

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1 Some scholars also include Dynasty III in the Old Kingdom.
can also be seen especially in the concept of *Maat*, kingship and religious beliefs which are detailed later in the Unit.

The Middle Kingdom was followed by the ‘Second Intermediate Period’ (XIII to XVII Dynasty) lasting for almost two hundred years. This period saw the rule of Kings of foreign origins and was called the period of ‘Hyksos’ dynasty. The next five centuries formed the New Kingdom (XVIII to XX dynasties) followed by the ‘Third Intermediate Period’ (XXI to XXV Dynasty) for four hundred years. This period was followed by the rule of the Dynasty of Saites (XXVI Dynasty). In 525 BCE Egypt was conquered by the Persians and became a part of the Achaemenid empire. Egypt was conquered by Alexander of Macedonia in 332 BCE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dynasties</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Dynastic Period</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>c.5000-3100 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early Dynasty</td>
<td>I-II</td>
<td>c. 3100-c.2686 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Old or Early Kingdom</td>
<td>III-VI</td>
<td>c.2686-c.2181 BCE</td>
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<td>VII-X</td>
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<td>First Intermediate Period</td>
<td>late XI-early XIII</td>
<td>c.2180-c.2040 BCE</td>
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<td>Middle Kingdom</td>
<td>Early XIII</td>
<td>c.2040-c.1730 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Intermediate Period</td>
<td>XIII-XVII</td>
<td>c.1730-c.1550 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Kingdom</td>
<td>XVIII-XX</td>
<td>c.1550-c.1080 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third Intermediate Period</td>
<td>XXI-XXV</td>
<td>c.1080-c.664 BCE</td>
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<td>Saite Period</td>
<td>XXVI</td>
<td>664-525 BCE</td>
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<td>Late Period</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capture of Egypt by Alexander</td>
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<td>332 BCE</td>
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*Source: Kuhrt, 1995: 124*
8.5 KINGSHIP AND STATE

The unification of Egypt formed the basis of the Egyptian civilization. In Egypt, there was no word for the state. Monarchy was embedded in the concept of divinity. The sacrosanct nature of the Egyptian monarchy symbolized both the King and his administration. As a God, the King of Egypt had absolute power over the land of the country and also its inhabitants. In the polytheistic society, it was important for the King to establish relationships with different deities. The term son of ‘Re’ (an Egyptian God) which was often used to designate the Pharaoh was meant to establish a relationship between the King and the God. Thus, the King is also identified with the falcon Horus and as the ‘son of Osiris’ or ‘son of Isis’. The latter title was significant particularly during the First Dynasty as it helped the rulers to claim legitimacy.

The biological parents were not given great importance in the contemporary texts. The decision that who should become the successor to the throne was in the hands of the King. This could have led to factions in the court as well as the royal household. The King could not act arbitrarily but only according to maat or the right order. The concept of maat advocated stability and unchanged order of matters within the society and its culture where the Pharaoh was the representative of God. The maat was expected to be re-enacted with every new King (Manuelian & Scheide, 2015: 2).

8.5.1 Administrative Units

Egypt was divided into villages, smaller towns and royal estates. These were grouped into administrative units or nomes which were under the control of a local governor or nomarch. Upper Egypt was divided into 22 nomes and the Lower Egypt was divided into 19 nomes (Kuhrt, 1995: 151). The officials were appointed from the royal families who by virtue of their high birth were qualified as best suited for the specialized royal functions. They were believed to possess King’s divine qualities to some extent (Morenz, 1960). Even the families of the previous Pharaohs were considered to be eligible for the post in the government. The royal family occupied the highest position. The burial ground of the highest officials of Early Dynasty at the city of Helwan comprises of more than 10,000 graves showing the vastness of early administration (Wilkinson, 1999: 96). The lower ranks of the Early Dynasty were open to the non-royal individuals. The administration was governed by the members of the royal household. Government activity and the royal office was originally an expansion of the functions of the royal service. The most important official designations were that of the vizier or ‘steward of the whole land’ and ‘counsellor of all orders of the King’. Men in charge of mining and foreign trade were called ‘Treasurers of the God’. The post of vizier was considered to be the most important official post as the vizier had access to the Pharaoh and was instructed to give the King an audience in the morning and acted as his chief executive. Initially, the post was occupied by members of the royal family, but later commoners also became vizier. In the Old Kingdom, royal administration was based on the economic and fiscal offices. The fiscal offices were divided into granaries (snwt/snwy) and treasury (pr hd/prwy hd). The important posts were that of state granary official, state treasurer, and overseer of the great courts of justice.

The officials were required to have certain level of literacy. In Early Dynasty, writing was used as a tool for political control and all administrators took upon the role of scribes. This had helped the early Egyptian Dynasty’s supervision and control over the economy. Egypt witnessed a major change in statehood during the third and fourth dynasties of the Old Kingdom. The state became a complex machinery and the royal family was not able to manage all the components of the state alone. Power was thus
distributed to the non-royals who were given positions in the administration sometimes as high as that of vizier. The offices were not based on hereditary claims, and the posts, at least theoretically, depended on the performance of the official’s public duties such as helping the poor and giving fair judgments.

The seals act as one of the most important evidence of the Egyptian Dynasties. The seals from the Early Dynasties however do not throw much light on the provincial administrations and mostly talk about the royals and the elites. These early archaeological pieces of evidence also do not throw light on the military and the political authorities. In the later period, the most commonly used seal type was scarab. Spiral motifs and titles of officials on these seals are characteristic of the Middle Kingdom. The inscriptions on such seals sometimes refer to places and deities. The scarabs often bore the royal names, particularly those from the Eleventh Dynasty to the Late Period. The names of the Hyksos dynasts had been largely deciphered from the scarabs.

8.5.2 Justice

The justice system of the Egyptian culture was rooted in religion. Legislative powers were vested in the Kings and he was responsible for making the hp or laws, wd or decrees and tp-nd or the regulations, and to ensure law and order in the country. There was no distinction between the executive officials and the judiciary. The concept of maat formed the core of the Egyptian justice system which was defined and guaranteed by the King. There were few codified laws in ancient Egypt as the Pharaoh was considered to be the highest judge and all the laws emanated from him. The judicial officials including the viziers, from the Fifth Dynasty, took charge of the legal matters and bore the title of ‘priests of maat’. One of the most important duties of a vizier was thus fulfilling the role as the highest judge of Egypt. This initial incorporation of justice in religion remained throughout the Egyptian history and even the queens and officials were taken to vizier’s office for a fair trial by a trusted official (Garcia, 2003: 10).

8.5.3 Military and Warfare

In ancient Egypt, the use of violence or warfare was dependent on the sanctions of the royalty. From the Middle Kingdom, the mastery of specialized weapons, the organizations of manpower, leadership and battle experience were basic features of any claims to the throne. The soldiers were sent out from their towns or nomes for state service to the Egyptian fortresses in Nubia, where the soldiers were controlled by the city administrators and the Guardsmen or retainers. The soldiers were known after their Egyptian hometowns. During the wars of the Second Intermediate Period, the Upper Egyptian governors and town commanders defended their territory by deploying local armed forces. The militia changed from this period onwards as professional soldiers were introduced in Egypt. The deployment of mercenaries and inducting the prisoners of war was however common throughout the Egyptian history (Gnirs, 2003: 640-642).
Facilitated by the increase in economic resources, the army and militia experienced an expansion during the New Kingdom.

**Check Your Progress Exercise-1**

1) How did the Pre-Dynastic era pave the way for the rise of the Egyptian Civilization?

2) What were the different components of the administration in ancient Egypt?

3) Write a note on *Maat*.

4) Describe the Egyptian military structure.

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**8.6 SOCIETY**

The Egyptian society was based on the ideals of equal justice with the King being the epitome of judgment. Life for the commoners was hard in Egypt. It is not known for sure if the people were attached to the land and subjected to forceful recruitment for undertaking public works. The construction workers were however mostly paid in grains, barely sufficient for them to survive. Rarely do we come across evidence of monetary remuneration for labourers engaged in construction works.

The market scenes occasionally depicted in the inscriptions, give a picture of simple local market, where the items being exchanged were mostly food items and drinks, manufactured goods like the wooden headrests (used instead of pillows by the Egyptians), jewels, cloth, fish hooks and spindle-whorls. The presence of market for the exchange of necessary commodities indicates the circulation of exchanges apart from the royal grain system.
The earliest literature and philosophy were based on religion. A gradual introduction of secular literature occurred in the later phase. The Egyptian love poetry is one such genre. The evidence of stage play suggests the presence of drama. It is believed that masks of Gods were made as props used in the drama. Masks were also used by the priests while carrying on the religious ceremonies (Wolinski, 1987: 22).

Language though initially sufficed as elementary, became complex and the concept of grammar came into being. Like Egyptian literature, science also had its roots in religion. Natural death, for instance, was perceived as a message from God. Medical treatments were often associated with magic and myths. The profession of medicine was initially associated with priesthood and was often steeped in religious rituals. Like medical science, other branches of science were also associated with religion. Astronomical observations played an important part in the funeral rites, to create connection between the living and the dead.

### Writing System

The first written objects in Egypt were painted or incised potsherds of about 3100 BCE. The writing was ‘cursive’ and recorded the names of chiefs or rulers, or deliveries of goods to their tombs/houses. Egyptian ‘hieroglyphic’ writing began a little later, on votive objects i.e. objects offered in fulfillment of a vow, deposited in temples, on the walls of the temples and tombs of chiefs and rulers, and on small ivory tags tied to objects deposited in tombs. It was used to make notations on highly symbolic reliefs depicting royal feats, on stone palettes, and ceremonial maces. At Hierakonopolis, the first capital of an inchoate Egyptian state, many inscribed objects were found in a cache of old things ritually buried in a temple.

The signs of the second kind of writing were pictures, mainly of recognizable objects, but also the names of persons and deities. While the cursive writing, for humdrum record keeping, was written with a few strokes, the unique quality of Egyptian hieroglyphic or formal writing was its aesthetic property. Equipped with cakes of soot and red ochre, occasionally other colours as well, the scribe was an artist using reed pens, thin and thick brushes, and pointed erasers. Signs were closely spaced, and their forms standardized, living things having to be shown in profile, but horns and eyes frontally, and so on. In some cases, writing blends into what we would call relief or painting. Sometimes hieroglyphic writing occurred together with painting on a temple or tomb wall, as an adjunct to art. It is the cursive form that changed over time, whereas the formal and aesthetic hieroglyphic script, used concurrently, changed little.


### 8.7 ECONOMY

The institution of the treasury was involved with goods like linen, wine and oil. The granary, on the other hand, acted as storage for grains. Local and private granaries and treasuries were also present. In the Old Kingdom, land taxation appears to be the most important source of revenue. Mining and quarrying projects also delivered mineral wealth to the central government. Contemporary evidence shows that the state took part actively in the mining activities of ancient Egypt. Wealth in third millennium BCE was not measured in money, as currency system was not introduced. The barter system was widely used as the medium of exchange. The economy was based on the exchange of foodstuffs, grains, cattle, bread, beer and linen (Warden, 2014: 233). The value of commodities was expressed in quantities of copper, silver or grain. The copper or *dhn* or *deben* which weighed .91 grams appeared to be a prominent mode of exchange in the New Kingdom. Silver appears only in the early years of Ramesses III’s reign (c. 1187-56 BCE). However, grains were used to express the value of inexpensive objects like baskets. Copper was weighed as 1 *khar* (48 kg approx.) of grain.
The Egyptians grew staple food grains like the wheat and barley and commercial crops like flax and papyrus. Each year the flooding of the river Nile acted as a curse for the Egyptian farmers but also helped to restore the fertility of the soil. The farmers cultivated around 800 hectares with the help of irrigation. The earliest evidence of irrigation dates back to 3100 BCE. The Mesopotamian water lifting device known as the shaduf was used in Upper Egypt after 1500 BCE (Noaman & Quosy, 2017:18). This technology helped the cultivators to cultivate crops in the dry summer and helped in the expansion of agriculture. Planting of new seeds took place in October till March, after receding of the flood water. Irrigation was believed to be a sacred work and the major irrigation projects were state-sponsored. This helped in the expansion of agriculture beyond Nile valley. Irrigation work was supervised by local officials. The nomes (administrative units) developed as local irrigation units. Local labourers were employed to dredge channels, dig canals and ditches, build earthen dams, construct dike basins and to raise water with buckets (Hughes, 1992:17). Government officials tried to prevent the fluctuations of grain supplies in the country and regulate the supply of grains. In spite of state interventions, during the time of crop failures, the problems of flood and famine often hampered the agriculture of Egypt.

### Cultivation in Ancient Egypt

The cultivation of wheat, barley, beans, gram and other winter crops required less efforts when compared with South Asia. For irrigation of the soil before planting, Egyptians had to pay attention to their local natural basins, making cuts in, or raising, their walls according to need, and guiding the flow of the flood from one place to another, so that the maximum area was inundated. Occasionally a natural basin needed to be subdivided with low mud walls, or the overflow channels deepened.

*Source: MHI-01, Block 2, Unit 6: 8.*

**Figure 8.4 : Egyptian Wall Painting from the period of New Kingdom depicting a farmer working with a shaduf from the tomb of Ipuy (located on the west bank of Nile)**

*Credit: Rogers Fund, 1930

*Source:* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/16/Garden_Scene%2C_Tomb_of_Ipuy_MET_vs2973.jpg
Pre-Dynastic goods were found in Byblos on the coast of present day Lebanon. State played an important role in the trade and commerce of Egyptian Civilization. Trade above the village level was controlled by the state as early as the First Dynasty (Curtin, 1984: 71-74). The contemporary Egyptian records do not mention merchants as a separate entity before 2000 BCE, though it is widely believed that large scale trade was associated with the royal granaries and state officials. Egyptian trade with other parts of the eastern Mediterranean was normally under government control, but evidence of the presence of foreign merchants is also found.

Epigraphic evidence is found of the expeditions sent by the Egyptian rulers to the neighbouring areas to obtain commodities and goods either by acquisition or trade. Present day Lebanon and Egypt had a flourishing trading network. Lebanon supplied Egypt with its timber in exchange for the Egyptian crafts. Egyptian trade to the south was carried by the government expeditions from Nile to the Red Sea to present day Yemen. These official expeditions started from 2500 BCE and mainly dealt with luxury items like frankincense, ebony, myrrh and gold. There is evidence of the import of Syrian timber during the Pre-Dynastic Period. The Egyptian contact with the port town of Byblos of Levant is well documented. The Egyptians imported timber for coffins and to make boats and statues, as good quality wood was not available in Egypt. Regular expeditions were also sent to Ebla in North Syria and the turquoise mines in the Sinai desert (Kuhrt, 1995: 145). The presence of maritime trade and sea faring activities of the Egyptians are documented in their paintings of ships and boats. The Egyptian boats like the boats of the Mesopotamian and the Indus civilization had square sails and the plank boats were tied by reeds, though metals like bronze and copper would have also played some role.

A very interesting idea was forwarded by Richard L. Smith, who pointed out that the foreign trade under the royals in the early dynasties was based on the mechanism of gift exchange. In one evidence, the Pharaoh had sent the King of Babylon, gifts amounting to 26 pounds of gold, 6.5 pounds of silver, 18.5 pounds of bronze, textiles, more than 1000 stone vases filled with aromatic oils, 163 empty stone vases, finger rings, necklaces, mirrors, ivory boxes and other items. From the Kings of Babylon, the Egyptians received horses and chariots, silver, bronze, lapis lazuli and oil. Thus, the royal trade was essentially carried on through the medium of exchange of gifts (Smith, 2009: 48). Seidlmayer is of the view that Egypt became economically richer and culturally more complex. There was rise in prosperity and ordinary tombs became considerably larger and burials began to be provided with much better grave goods (Gee, 2015: 65).

### 8.8 RELIGION AND TEMPLES

God was perceived as an individual, often associated with some attributes or positions and was defined and characterized by form and name. Like human beings, Gods were believed to have been created by a primordial God i.e. the initial or the first of all Gods and Goddesses. The Gods were not always immortal, and it was believed that the Moon God Thoth calculated the lifetime of Gods as well as of humankind.

The etymology of the names of the three most important Egyptian Gods – Re/Ra, Ptah and Osiris, are not yet certain. In the case of Re attempts have been made to interpret the name as ‘companion’, an illusion to the sun’s role as the companion of the moon. Ptah, on the other hand, is often connected to sculpture and Osiris as ‘seat of the eye’. Neith is the ‘Awful One’ and symbolizes the war Goddess, Isis obtained her name from ‘the throne’, Amun was the ‘Hidden One’ or the air God, who gained a lot of importance in Egyptian religion. The name Hathor is designated with the ‘house of Horus’ and
Thoth as the messenger of the Gods and Atum or ‘he who is the totality’ is associated with intellect (Morenz, 1960: 23-24).

In Egypt, God was served by various philanthropic acts by the King such as building a temple, donating images or restoring or cleaning them. The land was often held by the temple and the state, and often there was an absence of division between the two. The Pharaohs often established new domains, often liquidating those of the predecessors. The lands of temples were often tilled on behalf of Pharaoh. For instance, the workmen of Deir el-Medina (an ancient Egyptian village) though employed by the King were paid by the temples (Jansen, 1975: 182). The control of the apportioning areas of the main temples was in the hands of the local state officials. Temples had granaries to ensure a steady supply of grain to the temples. The temple granaries supported a large number of priests who depended on the temples or tombs for subsistence (Teeter, 2011: 16-18, 36).

The priests had the responsibility of looking after the temples and images. The common people served God by way of honouring and glorifying Gods in festivals. The relationship between God and human beings was one of interdependence where gratitude and piety coexisted with hopeful expectations from God.

**Priesthood**

According to the contemporary economic records, priesthood was a major institution in Egyptian society. During the Fifth Dynasty, the funerary cult of Neferirkare had between 250 to 300 priests associated with priesthood. Smaller temples like that of Anubis at Fayum and in Teudjoy, employed between 50 to 80 priests.

The rank of priest or *Ka* was an integral part of the Egyptian society and economy.
Initially the post of priests mostly belonged to the members of the royal family. However, as the administration became complex, a larger number of non-royal people were admitted to the ranks of priests. The rank was hereditary and often passed on within the family. There were various kinds of priesthood like that of Khery Bebet or Lector priest, Sem priests, Hem Netcher and the Iwnmutef Priests. The Lector priests were distinguished by their ability to read and their main duty was to recite specialized religious texts in both temple and mortuary rituals. In the Old Kingdom, the Lectors belonged to the royal household but by the Middle Kingdom, any person of knowledge could become a Lector priest. The Lector also played an important role in the administration. The God’s father was associated with the daily offerings to God or the offering for the soul of the deceased. They were mostly related to the cult of Amun, Ptah and Min (associated with fertility and power). In New Kingdom, they were involved with the supply of food and other requirements to the temples. The title of Sem priests was prestigious and often attached to the sect of Anubis and Khnum. From the middle of the Eighteenth Dynasty, Sem acted as the First Priest overseeing temple lands, priests and craftsmen.

The Hem Netcher had great economic power, as he oversaw the materials used for the daily offering and often acted as the local governor. The lower ranks of hem netcher were responsible for duties within the sanctuary of the temple. The Iwnmutef priests were funerary priests who worked along with the sem and were associated with both private and royal mortuary cults. The King himself chose to be the First Priest. The priests were paid in kind from the offerings presented to the God or the royal and private statues in temples or tombs.

Most of the priests were also engaged with other professions like trade or as government officials. The combination of secular and sacred professions was present throughout the Egyptian civilization. For example, Harkhuf belonging to Sixth Dynasty was the overseer of foreigners, the seal-bearer of the King and a Lector priest. Similarly, a priest named Onurismose from Nineteenth Dynasty held the titles of God’s Father and High Priest of Onuris as well as the royal scribe and scribe of the elite troops of the King. Nebnetcheru from XXII Dynasty was a priest of Amun in Karnak and also worked as the Chief of all the works on monuments.

The selection of the priest depended on the importance of a cult in a particular dynasty. Unlike the later historical period, ancient Egypt had no monastic organizations and the priests lived in the villages and had a familial life. Though they occupied a prominent position in society, the visual representations of the priests in the temple walls were less ornamental than the Kings. The priests started to be depicted in the temple walls from the Greco-Roman period and were mostly shown as part of a procession or enacting temple or funerary rites for the tomb owners.

8.9 SETTLEMENTS AND ARCHITECTURE

The evidence for towns and settlements is less and rare. The cities like Hierakonpolis, Abydos, Elephantine and Edfu situated in south Egypt are important. The settlements were mostly small provincial towns. They were surrounded by a thick wall. Each town had a shrine which normally lay inside the walled area. However, the towns were not fortified by walls and the walls can only be seen in the frontier regions. The houses were closely built, and the population density was high. Important settlements were located in oases of the Libyan desert. These included Dakhla, Kharga, Bahriya and Farafra. These settlements were linked to the Nile valley. Excavations at Dakhla have revealed evidence of wall, pottery kilns, mud brick structures and cemetery sites. Control of the oases and the settlements were important for defense of the western frontier of Egypt. The interest of the Egyptian administration in the desert regions was in its manpower...
and resources. The regions were rich in mineral resources of diorite, amethyst, copper and gold. Nubia was an important settlement and provided access to ebony, panther skins, ivory and fine oils. The settlement at Buhen was the source of copper deposits.

The Egyptians’ belief in the service of the dead involved donations to secure a proper funeral and provision for, thereafter, had a considerable impact on their economic life, administration and law. The Second Dynasty architects had used extensive stonework in the construction of tombs at Abydos and Hierankonpolis. Lime stone was used in the construction of the first one, while in the latter, red stone was used. The great royal tombs in the form of pyramids are the most known form of Egyptian architecture. The first pyramid was the step-pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara. Netjerikhet Djoser is known for setting several architectural benchmarks, during his reign. He expanded the use of stone in construction works and the tombs started to be decorated more often with stone and wooden slabs (Manuelian & Schneider, 2015: 5-6).

The funerary enclosures were laid out over an enormous terrain enclosed within the palace like walls and memorialized in stone were some of Egypt’s most important royal rituals and ceremonies. The magnificent pyramids of Fourth Dynasty are still considered to be the wonders of the world. The pyramids of Cheops and Chefren and Mycerinus symbolize the epitome of this architectural form. During this period, the queens were also occasionally buried in smaller tombs. The layout of the pyramids often reflected the political structure of the old system. The layout of the Fourth Dynasty’s pyramid was in a manner of houses facing a street and it has been argued that the largest and closest to the King’s tomb reflects the importance of the tomb owner within the political hierarchy. A boat was enclosed with the pyramid so that the Kings could proceed onwards in their afterlife.

Sneferu (founding monarch of the Fourth Dynasty) was not willing to spend money on elaborate construction works. Thus, the government’s patronage to construction works was regularized and standardized. To attain power over the provinces, he had established
pyramids all over the country. These pyramids were symbols of the royal presence specially in the important political and economic centres of Hierakonopolis, Naqada, Abydos, Zawiet el-Meitin, Seila and Abu Rawas. The people who were involved with the royal works like that of the chief builders of the pyramid and their families and servants and those who rendered direct personal services to the King were also those who were buried close to the royal burial. The development and elaboration of the royal tomb were accompanied by the development of standard beliefs in royal funerary temples, with King fighting over the traditional enemies of Egypt. The royal tombs did not depict individual, historical and military facts. However, the private tombs of the elites and the governors, provide vast information on agriculture, markets, cattle rearing, wine production and even domestic activities.

Thebes was the religious capital of Egypt. The spectacular royal burial ground was made up of rock-cut tombs and acted as a royal burial ground for 500 years. The tomb contains the mummies of ancient Pharaohs and queens. In 1922, the tomb of Tutankhamun was discovered from this region. The mortuary rituals involved the mumification of the dead bodies. According to sources, the embalming of the body of King Seti I of Nineteenth Dynasty took 70 days. The body was dried with the naturally occurring salt called natron. Vital organs like the lungs, intestines, liver and stomach were removed from the body and stored separately in containers called canopic jars, which in turn were placed inside richly decorated and gilded shrine protected by four Goddesses: Isis, Nephtys, Neith and Selkis. The body of the King was washed and filled with resin and bundles of linen and wrapped in linen bandages and protective amulets. The number and size of the pyramids reduced drastically region wise after the Fourth Dynasty. The reason is not evident, but the diversification of resources to other sectors could be an important reason. From the Fifth Dynasty, ‘pyramid texts’ were inscribed on the walls of the pyramids and provided important information of the contemporary Egyptian society and polity.

8.10 DECLINE OF EGYPT

Historians and archaeologists are often of the view that the decline of Egypt happened over a course of several centuries. A series of harvest failures, disastrous floods, earthquakes, destruction of crops by marauders, disruption of trade routes and enemy attacks, all contributed to the downfall of Egypt (Kuhrt, 1995: 386).

The King Ramesses II’s long rule of 67 years (1279-1213 BCE) saw peace and prosperity on the one hand, and drain of wealth and invasions on the other. He strengthened the foreign trade and initiated grand construction projects. These projects proved to be a burden on the royal exchequer. This was followed by the invasions of the sea-people, giving fatal blows to the country. The invasion was followed by a fragmented and weak centralized government. His reign was further followed by a series of weak rulers and a subsequent decline of the economy and trade. This gave rise to powerful factions of priests and local governors. The government of southern Egypt, for instance, came under the control of the Theban priests of Amun and the priests of the local dynasties. This led to the origin of the era of ‘priestly dynasties’ which was further strengthened by marriage alliances.

The weakness of central authority, however, hampered the economy of Egypt. Trade and commerce were often disrupted, revenue system suffered, and the economic framework disintegrated. At Thebes, the interruptions in the supply of resources to the employees of the state led to strikes and series of tomb robbing scandals (Pemberton, 2013: 186). Similar incidents took place at state properties, including the temples. The
breakdown of the economy and polity led to the decline of the societal framework. The number of crimes increased. Social unrest was on the rise. The frontiers were not guarded, and robbing and raids became frequent affairs. Libyans were often blamed for plundering the Egyptian settlements, specially the frontier ones. By the end of the Ramesses Dynasty, the inhabitants of the village of Deir el-Medina were forced to abandon their village and take refuge in the temple at Medinet Habu (located on the west side of the river Nile).

The internal unrest and instability were accompanied by continuous foreign invasions, which led to the final downfall of the Egyptian civilization. The invasion of the sea people was followed by attacks from its neighbouring areas of Libya from the West and Nubia from the South. The rulers of Egypt from 950-730 BCE were of Libyan lineage. Under the Libyans and with Nubian influence, Egypt was able to defend the prevailing politico-economic challenges. Mesopotamian model of assimilation was followed. The conquerors did not rob or loot the conquered areas. Instead, they ruled those areas efficiently and worked towards their prosperity. In the 7th century, Egypt recovered to unify under an Egyptian Pharaoh. However, the fruits of success were limited. Egyptians were destroyed by the Assyrians in continuous raids during 671-663 BCE. The final blow was struck by Alexander of Macedonia in 332 BCE, leading to the destruction of the Egyptian civilization.

**Check Your Progress Exercise-2**

1) Explain the influence of religion on the Egyptian statecraft and society.

2) Discuss the economic structure of Egypt.

3) What led to the downfall of the Egyptian Civilization?
8.11 SUMMARY

The unification of Egypt under Menes paved the rise of the great civilization. Religion was the basis of statecraft, administration, politics and society. The monarchy was embedded in the concept of divinity. The Pharaoh or the King was the epitome of power with a claim of sanction from divinity. The initial dynasties saw the royal households occupying almost all the executive offices. However, with the bureaucracy becoming more complex, the commoners were included in the government offices. The size and density of Egyptian settlements continued to increase with time, with the latter settlements showing signs of Libyan and Nubian influences. Religion continued to play an important role in the lives of Egyptians. The great civilization of Egypt declined under the leadership of weak rulers and continuous foreign invasions. The invasion of Alexander was the final nail in the coffin. The civilization declined but the legacy of the Egyptians still lives on.

8.12 KEY WORDS

Dbn/Deben : copper coins.
Emmer wheat : a variety of wheat with bearded ears and spikelet each containing two grains. The wheat was a daily staple for the ancient Egyptians.
Maat : Egyptian concept of justice and order.
Nomarch : local governors.
Nomes : administrative units.
Papyrus : a material prepared in Ancient Egypt from the stem of a water plant and was used as paper for writing.
Pharaoh : Egyptian title for a King.
Pr hd/Prwy hd : treasury.
Snwt/Snwy : granaries.

8.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise-1

1) See Section 8.3
2) See Sub-section 8.5.1
3) See Sub-section 8.5.2
4) See Sub-section 8.5.3

Check Your Progress Exercise-2

1) See Section 8.6, and Section 8.8
2) See Section 8.7
3) See Section 8.10 on the Decline of Egypt
8.14 SUGGESTED READINGS


PDF:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/124743.pdf?refreqid=search%3A4c533b5ef850847ddaf8a4b0c861c0dd

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40000484.pdf?refreqid=search%3A32f93b763a1c10b282ab086351828847
8.15 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Ancient Egypt History and Mysteries
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6DdNtBRIU

Engineering of Ancient Egypt - How Pyramids Are Built
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9zN5JuubN0

The Mighty Egyptian Civilization: Ruled By Ramesses II
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lo7jaH2yGk

The Lost Gods of the Egyptians
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWzKAFveXyo