

## Ancient Egypt (3,200 B.C. – 500 B.C.)

### I. Geography

Egypt is located in North Africa and is surrounded by the Nile River, which is the longest river in the world. Egypt was a river valley civilization and the Nile was crucial to the development of Egyptian civilization. The fertile soil allowed Egyptian farmers to produce large amounts of food. The river also served as a unifying factor in Egyptian history. In ancient times, the Nile was the fastest way to travel through the land. This made both transportation and communication easier. Egypt was partially protected against invasion by natural barriers such as deserts, mountains, and seas. Because the land would be complete desert without the Nile waters, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus called Egypt “the gift of the Nile”.



### II. Early History

King Menes united Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt into a single kingdom and created the first Egyptian royal dynasty. A “dynasty” is a family of rulers who’s right to rule is passed on within the family. Egyptian kings were called “pharaohs” and ruled by “divine right”, or the absolute right to rule given by god. The pharaoh, almost always a man, was worshipped as the gods’ earthly representative. The pharaoh was an absolute ruler who made laws, waged wars, kept written records, owned the land, and constructed irrigation canals and public buildings. The pharaoh was assisted by prime ministers called “viziers”, who were the tax collectors, scribes (writers), and advisors. Pharaohs undertook a number of helpful projects. The draining of swampland in the Nile River Valley provided thousands of acres of new farmland. The digging of a canal to connect the Nile River to the Red Sea aided trade and transportation.

### III. Social Hierarchy

Egyptian society was divided into classes. The pharaoh held the highest position in society. Next were the priests; who served the gods and goddesses. Third were the nobles, who fought the pharaoh’s wars, followed by the scribes, merchants, and craftspeople. Near the bottom was the biggest group, the peasant farmers. Beneath the peasants were the slaves. Peasants did the farming work and slaves did the manual labor, such as digging irrigation ditches and building temples. Woman had a higher status in Egyptian society than in any other ancient civilization. A woman could own property, enter business deals, and obtain a divorce.

### Questions to Answer

1. Why was the Nile River important to the development of Egyptian civilization?
2. What is a “dynasty”?
3. Why did Egyptian “pharaohs” have so much power?
4. How were social classes structured in ancient Egypt?