

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- Explain the reasons for the rise and fall of the Old Kingdom

The Old Kingdom is the name commonly given to the period from the Third Dynasty through the Sixth Dynasty (2686-2181 BCE), when Egypt gained in complexity and achievement. The Old Kingdom is the first of three so-called “Kingdom” periods that mark the high points of civilization in the Nile Valley. During this time, a new type of pyramid (the step) was created, as well as many other massive building projects, including the Sphinx. Additionally, trade became more widespread, new religious ideas were born, and the strong centralized government was subtly weakened and finally collapsed. During this time, the power of the Egyptian monarchy reached its zenith (height). The king was powerful enough to mobilize a significant percentage of the population to move to Giza during the farming off-season and help to build a pyramid.

These public works projects helped foster a sense of national identity among men and women who lived up to thousands of miles away from each other. Following the might of the Old Kingdom, the Egyptians were one people, united and proud. Although the nation was sometimes divided in strife, it always reunited eventually.

The king (not yet called Pharaoh) of Egypt during this period resided in the new royal capital, Memphis. He was considered a living god, and was believed to ensure the annual flooding of the Nile. This flooding was necessary for crop growth. The Old Kingdom is perhaps best known for a large number of pyramids, which were constructed as royal burial places. Thus, the period of the Old Kingdom is often called “The Age of the Pyramids.”

Egypt’s Old Kingdom was also a dynamic period in the development of Egyptian art. Sculptors created early portraits, the first life-size statues, and perfected the art of carving intricate decoration. Artwork was designed to ensure an ordered existence and to defeat death by preserving life in the next world.

The Beginning: Third Dynasty (C. 2650-2613 BCE)

The first notable king of the Old Kingdom was Djoser (reigned from 2691-2625 BCE) of the Third Dynasty, who ordered the construction of the step pyramid at Saqqara. It was in this era that formerly independent ancient Egyptian states became known as nomes, and were ruled solely by the king. The former rulers of these states were forced to assume the role of governors or tax collectors.

Golden Age: Fourth Dynasty (2613-2494 BCE)

The Old Kingdom and its royal power reached a zenith under the Fourth Dynasty, which began with Sneferu (2613-2589 BCE). Using a greater mass of stones than any other king, he built three pyramids: Meidum, the Bent Pyramid, and the Red Pyramid. He also sent his military into Sinai, Nubia and Libya, and began to trade with Lebanon for cedar wood.

Sneferu was succeeded by his son, Khufu (2589-2566 BCE), who built the Great Pyramid of Giza. After Khufu’s death, one of his sons built the second pyramid, and the Sphinx in Giza. Creating these massive projects required a centralized government with strong powers, organization and prosperity. Builders of the pyramids were peasants, working in the farming off-season, and specialists like stone cutters, mathematicians, and priests. Each household needed to provide a worker for these projects, although the wealthy could afford to send a substitute.

Right: The Pyramid of Khufu at Giza built c. 2560 BCE as a tomb for Khufu and constructed over a 20-year period. Modern estimates place construction efforts to require an average workforce of 14,567 people and a peak workforce of 40,000.



Left: Great Sphinx of Giza and the pyramid of Khafre.

The later kings of the Fourth Dynasty were king Menkaura (2532-2504 BCE), who built the smallest pyramid in Giza, Shepseskaf (2504-2498 BCE), and perhaps Djedptah (2498-2496 BCE). During this period, there were military expeditions into Canaan and Nubia, spreading Egyptian influence along the Nile into modern-day Sudan.

Religious Changes: Fifth Dynasty (2494-2345 BCE)

The Fifth Dynasty began with Userkaf (2494-2487 BCE), and with several religious changes. The cult of the sun god Ra, and temples built for him, began to grow in importance during the Fifth Dynasty. This lessened efforts to build pyramids. Funerary prayers on royal tombs (called Pyramid Texts) appeared, and the cult of the deity Osiris ascended in importance.

Egyptians began to build ships to trade across maritime routes. Goods included ebony, incense, gold, and copper. They traded with Lebanon for cedar, and perhaps with modern-day Somalia for other goods. Ships were held together by tightly tied ropes.

Decline And Collapse: The Sixth Dynasty (2345-2181 BCE)

The power of the king and central government declined during this period, while that of nomarchs (regional governors) increased. These nomarchs were not part of the royal family. They passed down the title through their lineage (inheritance), creating local dynasties that were not under the control of the king. Internal disorder over succession struggles (who would take the throne next) eventually led to civil war. The final blow was a severe drought between 2200-2150 BCE, which prevented Nile flooding. Famine, conflict, and collapse plagued the Old Kingdom for decades.



First Intermediate Period

The First Intermediate Period (c. 2181-2055 BCE), often described as a “dark period” in ancient Egyptian history after the end of the Old Kingdom.

Rule of Egypt was roughly divided between two competing power bases: in Lower and Upper Egypt. It is believed that political chaos during this time resulted in temples being pillaged, artwork vandalized, and statues of kings destroyed. These two kingdoms eventually came into military conflict, and the Theban kings conquered the north, which resulted in the reunification of Egypt under a single ruler, beginning the Middle Kingdom.