3.3: Continuities in Ancient Egypt

The long-term pattern in Egyptian history is that there were long periods of stability and prosperity disrupted by periodic invasions and disasters. Throughout the entire period, however, there were many cultural, spiritual, and intellectual traditions that stayed the same. In terms of the spiritual beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, those traditions most often focused on the identity and the role of the king in relation to the gods. In prosaic politics and social organization, they revolved around the role of the scribes. In terms of foreign relations, they evolved over time as Egypt developed stronger ongoing contacts with neighboring states and cultures.

The most important figure in Egyptian spiritual life was the king; he (or sometimes she) was believed to form a direct connection between the gods and the Egyptian people. Each king had five names – his birth name, three having to do with his divine status, and one having to do with rulership of the two unified kingdoms. One of the divine names referred to the divine kingship itself, temporarily linked to the current holder of that title: whoever happened to be king at the time.

The Egyptians had a colorful and memorable set of religious beliefs, one that dominated the lives of the kings, who claimed to be not just reflections of or servants of the gods, but gods themselves on earth. The central theme among the great epic stories of Egyptian religion was that there was a certain order and harmony in the universe that the gods had created, but that it was threatened by forces of destruction and chaos. It was the job of humans, especially Egyptians, to maintain harmony through proper rituals and through making sure that Egyptian society was stable. For Egyptians the world was divided between themselves and everyone else. This was not just a function of arrogance, however, but instead reflected a belief that the gods had designated the Egyptians to be the sacred keepers of order.

One peculiar aspect of the obsessive focus on the person of the king was the fact that the kings often married their sisters and daughters; the idea was that if one was a god, one did not want to pollute the sacred bloodline by having children with mere humans. An unfortunate side effect was, not surprisingly, that there were a lot of fairly deranged and unhealthy Egyptian royalty over the years, since the royal lines were, by definition, inbred. Fortunately for the Egyptian
state, however, the backbone of day-to-day politics was the enormous bureaucracy staffed by the scribal class, a class that survived the entire period covered in this chapter.

More writing survives from ancient Egypt than any other ancient civilization of the Mediterranean region. There are two major reasons for that survival. First, Egypt’s dry climate ensured that records kept on papyrus had a decent chance of surviving since they were unlikely to rot away. Thousands of papyri documents have been discovered that were simply dumped into holes in the desert and left there; the sand and the climate conspired to preserve them. Second, Egypt developed an important social class of scribes whose whole vocation was mastering the complex Egyptian writing systems and keeping extensive records of almost every aspect of life, from religious ritual to mundane record-keeping.

![Hieroglyphics](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Book%3A_Western_Civilization_-_A_Concise_History_I_(Bro…)

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): An example of hieroglyphics - the above depicts the sacred style used in temple and tomb carvings, as opposed to the “cursive” form used for everyday record keeping.

The writing of ancient Egypt was in hieroglyphics, which are symbols that were adapted over time from pictures. There were several different forms of hieroglyphics, including two distinct alphabets during the period covered in this chapter, all of which were very difficult to master. It took years of training to become literate in hieroglyphics, training that was only afforded to the scribes. Scribes recorded everything from tax records, to mercantile transactions, to the sacred prayers for the dead on the walls of the tombs of kings and nobles. They served as an essential piece of the continuity of Egyptian politics and culture for thousands of years. In other words, because they used the same language and the same alphabets of symbols, and because they recorded the rituals and transactions of Egyptian society, scribes were a kind of cultural glue that kept things going from generation to generation. In all three of the great dynasties and during the Intermediate Periods, it was the scribes who provided continuity.

As iconic as hieroglyphic writing, which remains famous because of the sheer amount of it that survived carved in stone in tombs and palaces, was the creation of monumental architecture by the Egyptian state, first exemplified by the pyramids. Sometime around 2660 BCE the first pyramid was built for the king Djoser. Djoser was renowned in the Egyptian sources for his wisdom, and centuries after his death he became a legendary figure to later Egyptians. The architect who designed the pyramid, Imhotep, was later deified as a son of Ptah, the god who created the universe. Unlike Mesopotamian ziggurats, which were always temples, the pyramids were always tombs. The purpose of the pyramids was to house the king with all of the luxuries and equipment he would need in his journey to the afterlife, as
well as to celebrate the king’s legacy and memory.

The pyramids were constructed over the period of about 250 years, from 2660 to 2400 BCE. For a long time, historians thought that they were built by slaves, but it now seems very likely that they were built by free laborers employed by the king and paid by royal agents. Each building block weighed about 2.5 tons and had to be hauled up ramps with ropes and pulleys. As noted above, only Egypt’s unique access to the bounty of the Nile provided enough energy for this to be viable. Egypt was the envy of the ancient world because of its incredible wealth, wealth that was the direct result of its huge surplus of grain, all fed by the Nile's floods. The pyramids were built year-round, but work was most intense in September, when the floods of the Nile were at their height and farmers were not able to work the fields. In short, nowhere else on earth could the pyramids have been built. There had to be a gigantic surplus of energy in the form of calories available to get it done.

Pyramid building itself was the impetus behind the massive expansion of bureaucracy in the Old Kingdom, since the state became synonymous with the diversion and redistribution of resources needed to keep an enormous labor force mobilized. The king could, in theory, requisition anything, mobilize anyone, and generally exercise total control, although practical limits were respected by the administration. Since there was no currency, “payment” to scribes usually took the form of fiefs (i.e. grants of land) that returned to the royal holdings after the official's death, a practice that atrophied after the fall of the Old Kingdom.

Like their neighbors in Mesopotamia, the Egyptians lived in a redistributive economy, an economy in which crops were taken directly from farmers (i.e. peasants) by the agents of the king and then redistributed. Appropriately enough, many of the surviving documents from ancient Egypt are tax records, carefully recorded in hieroglyphics by scribes. Peasants in Egypt were tied to the land they lived on and were thus serfs rather than free peasants. A serf is a farmer who is legally tied to the land he or she works on – they cannot leave the land to look for a better job elsewhere, living in a state very near to slavery. The peasants lived in “closed” villages in which people were not allowed to move in, nor were existing families supposed to move out.

Interestingly, unlike many other ancient societies, women in Egypt were nearly the legal equals of men. They had the legal right to own property, sue, and essentially exist as independent legal entities. This is all the more striking in that many of the legal rights that Egyptian women possessed were not available to women in Europe (or the United States) until the late 1800s, CE, over three thousand years later. Likewise, Egyptian women enjoyed much more legal autonomy than did women in many other ancient societies, particularly that of the Greeks.

Even though the essential characteristic of Egyptian religion and social structure was continuity, its relationships with neighboring cultures did change over time. One important neighbor of Egypt was the kingdom of Nubia to the south, in present-day Sudan. Nubia was rich in gold, ivory, and slaves, seized from neighboring lands, making it a wealthy and powerful place in its own right. Egypt traded with Nubia, but also suffered from raids by warlike Nubian kingdoms. One of the key political posts in Egypt was the Keeper of the Gateway of the South, a military governor who tried to protect trade from these attacks. At the start of the Middle Kingdom, Mentuhotep II managed to not only reunite Egypt, but to conquer the northern portion of Nubia as well. Kings continued this pattern, holding on to Nubian territory and building a series of forts and garrisons to ensure the speedy extraction of Nubian wealth.

Trade contact was not limited to Nubia, of course. Despite the fact that the Egyptians thought of themselves as being superior to other cultures and civilizations, they actively traded with not only Nubia but the various civilizations and
peoples of the Near and Middle East. Starting in earnest with the Middle Kingdom, trade caravans linked Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt (and, later, Greece as well). There was a rich diplomatic exchange between the Egyptian kings and the kings of their neighboring lands – overall, they spent far more time trading with their neighbors and sending one another gifts than waging war. Likewise, as noted above in the section on the New Kingdom, military expansionism did not preclude Egypt’s membership in a “brotherhood” of other states during the Bronze Age.

That being said, by the time of the Middle Kingdom, there was an organized and fortified military presence on all of Egypt’s borders, with particular attention to Nubia and “Asia” (i.e. everything east of the Sinai Peninsula). One king described himself as the “throat-slitter of Asia,” and all the way through the New Kingdom, Egyptians tended to regard themselves as being the most important and “central” civilization in the world.