

☦ The Middle Kingdom ☦

The Golden Age of Ancient Egyptian Civilization



Figure 1 – Senusret I and creator god, Ptah at Karnak
<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/senusret1.htm>

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The sheer span of the ancient Egyptian culture and heritage is monumental in our human record and encompasses approximately 506 centuries, ranging from the Predynastic period (5000 B.C.E.) to the Greco-Roman period (642 C.E.). Table 1 lists the major periods and their respective dynasties. Even so the ancient Egyptians experienced a high point in their civilization, a golden era now known as the Middle Kingdom. Many of the achievements of the Middle Kingdom are among the most notable of the history of ancient Egypt.

Table 1 – The Chronology of Ancient Egypt (Silverman 28)

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>PREDYNASTIC PERIOD 5000-3000 B.C.E. Badarian 5000-4000 Naqada I, Amratian 4000-3500 Naqada II, Gerzean 3500-3100 Naqada III, Dynasty 0 3100-3000</p> | <p>SECOND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD 1630-1539/23 B.C.E. Dynasty 15-16, Hyksos 1630-1523 Dynasty 17, Theban 1630-1539</p> |
| <p>EARLY DYNASTIC PERIOD 3000-2625 BCE Dynasty 1 3000-2800 Dynasty 2 2800-2675 Dynasty 3 2675-2625</p> | <p>NEW KINGDOM 1539-1075 B.C.E. Dynasty 18 1539-1292 Dynasty 19 1292-1190 Dynasty 20 1190-1075</p> |
| <p>OLD KINGDOM 2625-2130 B.C.E. Dynasty 4 2625-2500 Dynasty 5 2500-2350 Dynasty 6 2350-2170 Dynasty 7-8 2170-2130</p> | <p>THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD 1075-656 B.C.E. Dynasty 21, Tanite 1075-945 Dynasty 22, Bubasite 945-712 Dynasty 23 838-712 Dynasty 24 727-712 Dynasty 25, Nubian or Kushite 760-656</p> |
| <p>FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD 2130-1980 B.C.E. Dynasty 9-10 2130-1980 Dynasty 11 2081-1938</p> | <p>LATE PERIOD 664-332 B.C.E. Dynasty 26, Saite 664-525 Dynasty 27 525-405 Dynasty 28 409-399 Dynasty 29 399-380 Dynasty 30 381-343 Dynasty 31 343-332</p> |
| <p>MIDDLE KINGDOM 1980-1630 B.C.E. Dynasty 12 1938-1759 Dynasty 13 1759-after 1630 Dynasty 14 ?1675-after 1630</p> | <p>GRECO-ROMAN PERIOD 332 B.C.E.-642 C.E. Dynasty 32, Macedonian 332-305 Dynasty 33, Ptolemaic 305-30 Roman and Byzantine rule 30 B.C.E.-642 C.E.</p> |

The Middle Kingdom, or the Classical Egyptian era, is considered by many to be the most impressive period of Ancient Egypt, specifically in its regard to literature, the visual arts, and foreign influence. This period was also known for its prosperity and its peace. We know of twenty rulers during this time; their rule and the major achievements therein will be discussed throughout this paper. Table 2 presents a brief history of the Middle Kingdom. Various texts may choose to include different dynasties in the Middle Kingdom; for instance, Silverman begins the Middle Kingdom with Dynasty 12, whereas White and Hornung begin with the reunification that occurred in the 11th dynasty. I shall reflect White and begin with the 11th dynasty.

After the ensuing chaos of the first intermediate period Egypt was again reunited, this time under Nebhepetrie-Mentuhotep of Thebes, when he defeated Herakleopolis in 2008 B.C.E. His victories marked the beginning of Dynasty 11. This great deed inspired Nebhepetrie to change his Horus name; for fifty-one years following he was known as Sema-tawy, “He who united the Two Lands” (Hornung 48). It is interesting to note that at Deir el Bahri, Sema-tawy Mentuhotep (II) built a temple (and later at the same site, Queen Hatshepsut) wherein an unusual tomb of honor was unearthed. H. E. Winlock headed the excavations for the Metropolitan Museum of New York and found that, buried next to the Pharaoh Mentuhotep was a mass grave of sixty soldiers with their weapons arrayed.

It appears that Mentuhotep greatly honored these unnamed sixty soldiers by burying them so close to himself. The soldiers were commoners likely slain during a battle at what appears to be a fortified place (Mertz 107). These unidentified mummies may have been selected due to their great bravery in battle, and what determining war –

the scholars reason – could have won them that great honor other than the war of Herakleopolis?

Table 2 – Overview of the Middle Kingdom (Hornung 54, White 154, Parkinson 12)

| Dynasty | Rulers | Year | Notable Accomplishments, etc. |
|---------|---|--|---|
| 11 | Sehertawi Intef (I) Wahankh Intef (II) Nakhtnebtpefer Intef (III) Nebhetepre *Mentuhotep (II) Sankhkare *Montuhotep (III) Nebtawire *Mentuhotpe (IV) | 2008 1957 1945 | (2081-2065 B.C.E.) (2065-2016) (2016-2008) An exceptional warrior, reunited Egypt (2008-1957) (1957-1945) (1945-1939) *various accepted spellings |
| 12 | ‘The Kings of the Residence of Itj-tawi’ Amenemhet I Sesostris (Senwosret) I Amenemhet II Sesostris II Sesostris III Amenemhat III Amenemhat IV Queen Sobeknefru | 1938 1919 1876 1844 1836 1818 1770 1760 | (1938-1909 B.C.E.) (1919-1875) (1876-1842) (1844-1837) (1836-1818) (1818-1770(?)) (1770-1760) 1760-1756(?) |
| 13 – 14 | ‘The Kings who followed the House of Amenemhat I’ (Only the most important are listed, along with dynasty position.) 4 Sekhmenkare Amenemhat V 12 Khaankhre Sobekhotep (I) 16 Amenemhat-Sobekhotep II 17 Khendjer 21 Sekhemreswadjtawi Sobekhotep (III) 22 Khasekhemre Neferhotep I 24 Khaneferre Sobekhotep IV 27 Merneferre Iy | | (1756(?)-1640 B.C.E.) |

Nebhetepre Mentuhetep and his successors were able to restore a static structure to the ancient Egyptian way of life that had been lacking during the 1st intermediate period and the civil wars typical of that era. Mentuhetep II and III are known for their work of pacification (Mertz 110). Truces were declared between tribesmen of the desert and control of Nubia was again regained. To insure stability, the succession of the nomarchs was undone to make way for the central government as officiated by the crown. Notwithstanding, the centralized administration actually brought the ancient Egyptians together under a somewhat democratic rule of law. “All men were to be considered equal in the eyes of the law” (White 155). It was beliefs like these that called for a reformation of Egyptian law during this period, which facilitated the Middle Kingdom Pharaohs as great rulers and law givers. Justice was upheld and these new policies – modeled on Dynasty 4 government – were able to turn the kingdom around from its previously degenerate state.

With this renewed sense of justice and fairplay, the people were able to flourish as well. The king reconstructed and brought much-needed improvement into the water supplies, leading to a higher expectation of life. The worship of Amon-Ra, the mascot-god of Thebes, began to pervade on a national level and brought balance to the contemporary Osiris enthusiasm. “From this time onwards, every dead man, whether Pharaoh or commoner, was entitled to be judged before Osiris and declared ‘justified’(White 156).” Undoubtedly this feeling of justification before Osiris carried over into all aspects of ancient Egyptian life in the later dynasties.

Mentuhetep IV – Horus name Nebtawi – lost the throne in a very strange way, and unknowingly brought about a new Dynasty. Nebtawi wanted a stone sarcophagus for

his mortuary palace and sent some of his trusted men on an expedition to get the needed stone from Hammamat. A man named Amenemhat headed the expedition, and did such a thorough job overseeing that not one ass was lost. Legend has it that during the return trip, a pregnant gazelle ended up giving birth on the very stone the expedition was bringing back for the king's sarcophagus lid, for which its reward was a slit throat (Mertz 110).

The leader of this expedition was highly honored by Nebtawi because of his great success. In turn, the leader Amenemhat rewarded his liege by usurping the throne, but he made sure to bury the former Pharaoh in the stone sarcophagus (Mertz 111). How much of this story is true is hard to say, but according to White, the vizier Amenemhat led an expedition of ten thousand under the sovereign Mentuhotep IV. The ruling capacity of Amenemhat I later in the twelve dynasty would easily link him with the previous vizierate.

For comparison and contrasting purposes, in James Henry Breasted's *A History of the Ancient Egyptians*, the ruling line of the Mentuhoteps does not chronologically correspond to the one laid out in Mertz. Breasted places a line of five Mentuhoteps after the rule of two Intefs of the same Theban family. It is under the rule of the last three Mentuhoteps that Egypt is completely reunited. The first Mentuhotep, Horus name Nibtowere, is the sovereign that sends the group to Hammamat to obtain a stone for his sarcophagus. The second, Nibhepetre-Mentuhotep, erected the mortuary temple at Der el-Bahri where accordingly the sixty honored soldiers were discovered (Breasted 136). The third, Senekhkere, reigned for half a century. He sent his chief treasurer, along with three-thousand men, to bring back blocks for temple sculptures (Breasted 137). Breasted

does not allude to the way in which Amenemhat secured his power which was, according to other references, through usurpation.



Figure 2 - Inscription at the Wadi Hammamat 1 (Hornung 59)

So in the early twentieth century Dynasty 11 was replaced by Dynasty 12 under another Theban family, beginning with Amenemhat I, the capable yet usurping vizier. He built his capital fifty miles south of Memphis at Lisht, although as will be seen, his descendents favored the Faiyum depression.

Dynasty 12 is known for its revival of the Old Kingdom, and in itself is more accurately termed the “classical age” where literature and the visual arts are concerned. Scribal schools blossomed, and painting and sculpture excelled beyond anything previously known. Gold and other resources were brought from Nubia and the Sudan. The new ruling system kept the growing kingdom of Kush and also domestic affairs in check, through a strictly controlled system of government operating via the crown. These systems were in full swing during the rule of Senwosret III and Amenemhat III (Silverman 31).

After Amenemhet I ruled for twenty years, he named his son Sesostris as co-regent, which became somewhat of a tradition carried on by the following rulers (Hornung 55). Together they ruled for ten years, and Sesostris began a Nubian campaign. During this fateful campaign, Amenemhat I was betrayed and murdered by a harîm conspiracy (White 157). The news reached his son, the heir, and Sinuhe, the prince, who were returning from a Libyan campaign. We have Sinuhe's reaction to the messenger's news from his own mouth, and from it one can speculate that perhaps Sinuhe had a hand in the conspiracy. "Behold I stood; I heard his voice (i.e. the messenger's). As he spoke... My heart clave, my arms opened, While trembling fell on all my members. I stole away To seek for myself a place of concealment ... When I had reached the lake of Kemwer I fell down for thirst, fast came my breath, My throat was hot, I said 'This is the taste of death.' I upheld my heart, I drew my limbs together, As I heard the sound of the lowing of cattle, I beheld the Bedwin. That chief among them, who had been in Egypt, recognized me. He gave me water, he cooked for me milk. I went with him to his tribe." (Senuhe as quoted in Jones 60).

Sesostris I swiftly reached the capital and was able to retain his position as regent (Hornung 54). Under Sesostris I's rule, Egypt flourished, due in part to Sesotris' emulation of his father's ideals and institutions. Sesostris strengthened and enlarged the borders through military campaigns and the colonization of Nubia. Sesostris I also fueled the cult beliefs through the creation of grand monuments in Lisht, Karnak, and Heliopolis. His complex in Lisht modeled the architecture of the Old Kingdom. He also incorporated huge Osirid pillars along the causeway, in honor of the Osiris cult. It was around this time that the kings of Egypt realized they could solidify their rule by gaining

the favor of the people through building structure to the gods the kingdom worshipped. The quality of Sesostris I's artisans would not be surpassed until Dynasty 18 (Hornung 56).

During this time, Sesostris commissioned Khety to write *The Instruction of Amenemhat*, in honor of the former regent. It was written as a proxy voice for Amenemhat. This work allows us an interesting glimpse into the role of the kingship. With the waning of the Old Kingdom, the king and his descendants were no longer viewed as the proper rulers, but they had to justify themselves to the people through superhuman deeds and constant vigilance. The king of the Middle Kingdom's energy, vitality, and innovation were the only things that could protect the kingdom from another spell of anarchy. Khety also wrote *The Satire of the Trades*, which praised the scholarship of the scribal profession and became a classroom standard in the New Kingdom (Hornung 55).

Three years before Sesostris I's death, he appointed his son Amenemhet II as coregent. The kingship smoothly transitioned from father to son. Amenemhet II headed campaigns to the borders and as a result Egyptian influence and trade grew. Products of interior Africa were imported and Asia became a partner in Egypt's economy. Egyptian Dynasty 12 pottery has also resurfaced in distant regions such as Biblos, Ugarit, and Crete. Furthermore, a growing slave trade arose at this time (Hornung 61). Apparently not enough "labor" was acquired during the Egyptian campaigns to foreign lands, and the burgeoning slave trade was able to meet the demand.

In the year 1845 B.C.E., Amenemhet II's son Sesostris II became king, after having been coregent with his father. Sesostris changed his primary concerns from Nubia

to the Faiyum depression. He realized the worth of this area as an irrigation source. Correspondingly, Sesostri II began an irrigation project through the construction of dams and canals that would enhance Egyptian agriculture. Furthermore, the Faiyum region became known for its fertile lands and the crocodile-like god of this previously unimportant area – Sobek – became highly honored as a result. We also see a shift in the afterlife from celestial to terrestrial, and the scarab's popularity soars as the most popular amulet of the period. The scarab beetle embodies the gift of regeneration in the ancient Egyptian mind, and the regeneration concept is also emphasized in the figures of animals, specifically the hippopotami. During Sesostri's reign, the nomarchs increased in power, but nevertheless this was a peaceful and prosperous time for the kingdom (Hornung 62).

Sesostri III became Egypt's sole ruler after only nine years of Sesostri II's rule, which ended abruptly in his death. This new leader instituted new foreign and domestic policies. He organized Egypt into four regions: The northern and southern halves of the Nile Valley and the eastern and western delta. The nomarchal families were stripped of power (Hornung 64); this daunting task and his foreign influence would prove Sesostri III as a no-nonsense ruler. Sesostri strengthened and expanded Egypt's borders and defenses; Sesostri III's power is illustrated in the fact that he was worshipped as a god in Nubia until Dynasty 18. His military bases have been excavated as far away as Palestine and Samaria (Hornung 65).

Amenemhat III reaped the benefits of the previous rulers and inherited a well-established kingdom (Jones 74). He safeguarded what he had inherited and thus, Egypt knew yet another period of cultivation and fruition (Hornung 66). Under Amenemhat III, Egyptian influence extended beyond the third cataract. It was he who built the amazing

labyrinth at Hawara by the Faiyum depression that was immortalized by Herodotus and later excavated by Petrie and other Egyptologists. The impressive labyrinth was likely 800,000 square feet in extent and contained many large chambers (Jones 75).

Amenemhat IV's reign was short and none too impressive. But although the kingdom seemed in decline, the land was nevertheless safeguarded. He evidently had no male heir, for he was succeeded by his sister, Nefrusobk (Sobeknefru). She was the first female sovereign of Egypt and ruled for a short four years, under which the dynasty – as well as the Middle Kingdom – waned and ended.

A noted decline took place in Egypt with the waning of Dynasty 12 and the waxing of Dynasty 13. It is also hard to reconstruct the details since few monuments remain from this period. There were many kings who only reigned for a short period of time. The Middle Kingdom fell around this intermediary time due to the weakness of the later kings and the invasion of an Asiatic people called the Hyksos, who gained control of Egypt around the eighteenth century B.C.E.

Along with its extensive economic and political successes, the Middle Kingdom is highly praised for its literary contributions. Literature flourished and brought to us the great Egyptian works of *Sinuhe*, the *Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, Papyrus Westcar's *Tales of Wonder*, and Khety's *Instruction of Amenemhat* and *The Satire of the Trades*. The hymns to king and deity from the Middle Kingdom paved the way for the successive hymnic literature that arises in the New Kingdom. The mathematics that survives from the Middle Kingdom deals with the practicalities of pyramid building and field measurements. The medical papyri and field were contrasted by the mysticism of the magical practices papyri. Animal diseases were also noted and studied on papyri.

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