

Ancient Egypt in the Bronze Age

+ Add to Autoplay off

Lesson Transcript

This lecture first compares the natural features of the Nile valley to those of Mesopotamia, enumerating the advantages that geography offered the Egyptians. This is followed by a brief discussion of why Egyptian material culture survives while so much of Mesopotamian culture has been lost. The lecture ends with a whirlwind tour through 3,000 years of Egyptian history broken up into traditional historical periods.

The Benefits of the Nile Valley

The Bronze Age saw the rise and spread of many civilizations. Yet of all the civilizations that rose and fell in the Bronze Age, Egypt remains the most enduring example and is considered by many to represent the apex of Bronze Age civilization.

To understand why the Egyptian legacy shines so brightly compared to the other civilizations of the time, we must first compare Mesopotamia to the Nile valley because, in all fairness, the Egyptians owe as much of their glory to geography as to anything else.

At the heart of Egyptian civilization lies **the Nile**. All of Egypt lies along the banks of the Nile. To the east and west lay only barren desert, impassable for armies of the time. Thus, Egypt had but two fronts to defend: the mouth of the Nile at the Mediterranean to the north and the upper reaches of the Nile valley to the south. Compare this to Mesopotamian culture, which was in danger of invasion from all directions. The natural protection of the Nile valley allowed Egyptian civilization to avoid the constant incursions that destroyed so many Mesopotamian cultures.



The Nile had only two points of entry for invaders.

The Nile is also very different from the Tigris and Euphrates that fed Mesopotamian civilization. Where the Tigris and Euphrates flood chaotically, the Nile floods in a regular, predictable fashion. This predictability had two main results. First, it makes it much easier to plant and harvest according to a regular time table, allowing for reliable and bountiful harvests. Second, the predictability of the Nile allowed for central planning of agriculture to be very successful. This bolstered the credibility and power of centralized authority.

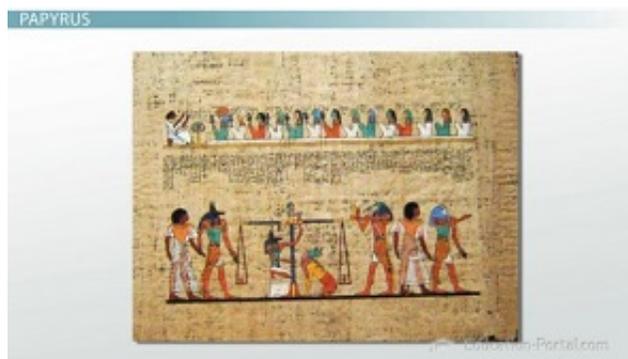
While Mesopotamian rulers were easily undermined, the priests and pharaohs of Egypt could predict, and therefore pretend to control, the very floods that made agriculture and life possible in the middle of a desert. It is no wonder, therefore, that Egyptian priests held incredible power and that the Pharaoh himself was considered a god.

This regular agricultural schedule might also provide the reason why the first calendars appeared in Egypt. By 4000 BCE, the Egyptians had already developed a calendar with 12 months of 30 days, with an extra five sacred days at the end of each year.

Thus, we see how the unique characteristics of the Nile valley protected Egypt, allowed it to thrive and encouraged centralized authority. Yet the gifts of the Nile to Egypt did not stop there.

Papyrus

Along the Nile, there grows a plant that grows nowhere else in the world, papyrus. As early as 3000 BCE, the Egyptians had discovered that the pith of this thin, reedy plant could be spread, flattened and dried to make a rudimentary sort of paper. While the Sumerians were busy poking sticks in clay tablets for millennia, the Egyptians were already using scrolls of papyrus to write. Records on Papyrus were lighter, easier to store and easier to make than clay tablets. This superior writing surface also allowed the Egyptians to retain their pictographic hieroglyphics long after the Sumerians had reduced their pictographs to the more abstract and standardized cuneiform. The superiority of papyrus was eventually recognized by the ancient world, and Egypt grew rich indeed on the export of paper.



The papyrus plant was used to make paper for Egyptian writings.

Stoneworks of Egypt

Yet the main reason Egypt shines so brightly in the otherwise murky Bronze Age has less to do with what the Egyptians achieved and more to do with how well those achievements survived. As you may recall from a previous lecture, Bronze Age Mesopotamia did not just write on baked mud, they built with it. Since the Mesopotamians were building with mud brick, even their most magnificent architectural achievements were quickly reduced to shapeless mounds by erosion. As a result, Sumerian cultures spent a great deal of energy and resources constantly rebuilding their temples and palaces. By contrast, Egypt had plenty of stone at its disposal and made good use of it, ferrying it up and down the Nile to where it was needed. Stone allowed the Egyptians to build larger, stronger, enduring monuments that survive to this day. As an added bonus, once the Egyptians had built a temple, it was there forever, allowing them to move on to build another temple.



The Temple at Luxor was one of many temples built in ancient Egypt.

Even when they did not use stone, the arid climate of Egypt allowed Egyptian artifacts to survive, while Mesopotamian artifacts quickly rotted away. This abundance of textual and material remains provides archaeologists with an abundance of evidence to interpret. The relative stability of the region ensured an almost unbroken record spanning nearly 3,000 years, offering us the clearest glimpse we have into the Bronze Age world.

Six Periods of Egyptian History

The first 3,000 years of Egyptian history have been divided into six periods ruled over by a succession of 31 dynasties: the Archaic, the Old Kingdom (also known as the Pyramid Kingdom), the First Intermediate Period, the Middle Kingdom, the Second Intermediate Period (also known as the Hyksos period) and the New Kingdom.

In the **Archaic Period (3100-2700 BCE)**, the First and Second Dynasties unified the Nile valley to build the kingdom of Egypt and established Memphis as its capital. They dug canals, built roads and founded cities. These early pharaohs established centralized bureaucracies and administered them with a well-developed written language. They also centralized Egyptian religion, using a method called **syncretism** to combine opposing gods into a single deity. Syncretism allowed Egyptians to avoid the sort of religious conflicts that would plague their Mesopotamian neighbors. Egyptian religion was polytheistic, worshipping semi-anthropomorphic gods who often behaved like humans despite having the heads of animals. A powerful priestly class would ensure that these deities and their worship would remain mostly unchanged over the millennia. The efforts of the Old Kingdom pharaohs laid the groundwork for one of the longest-lasting civilizations in history.

In the **Old Kingdom (2700-2200 BCE)**, the pharaohs of the Third through Sixth Dynasties reached the apex of their power. The Pharaoh was considered a god, and all of Egypt was his personal property. The pharaohs of the Old Kingdom used this supreme authority to build fabulous tombs for themselves, resulting in Egypt's most enduring works, the pyramids, culminating with the Great Pyramid and great Sphinx of Giza built by the pharaoh Khufu and his sons around 2500 BCE.



Ask a Question

The Old Kingdom period is known for the building of pyramids in Egypt.

The **First Intermediate Period (2200-2050 BCE)** marks a sharp decline in the authority of the Pharaoh as regional governors, or nomarchs, vied with one another for power. This plunged Egypt into a century and a half of civil war in which four short-lived dynasties rose and fell.

In the **Middle Kingdom (2050-1700 BCE)** two regional dynasties - the 11th and 12th - struggled to reunite fractured Egypt. The 11th Dynasty moved the capital to Thebes, only to have it relocated again to Lisht by the 12th Dynasty. These dynasties also used their limited power to build temples and pyramids, but nothing approaching the grandeur of the Old Kingdom. The Middle Kingdom was brought to an abrupt end by the invasion of the Hyskos, a mysterious chariot-driving people who plunged Northern Egypt into chaos.

The **Second Intermediate Period (1700-1550 BCE)** consists of a struggle between the native Egyptian dynasties to the south and the invading Hyskos to the north. After 250 years and five unsuccessful dynasties, the Hyskos were finally driven from Egypt through the military genius of Ahmose, who named himself Pharaoh of all Egypt and established the 18th Dynasty. This gave rise to the New Kingdom.

The **New Kingdom (1550-1100 BCE)** marks the apex of Egyptian power. Determined never to be invaded again, Egypt began conquering territory along the eastern Mediterranean. In the course of a century, they subjugated much of the Levant and Palestine and pushed into Anatolia. There their progress was halted by the Hittites, who had their own plans for the region. The Hittites and Egyptians fought non-stop for nearly three centuries before settling their dispute with a peace treaty in 1274. The words of this treaty survive to this day in Egyptian records.

Meanwhile, back at home, the pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty relocated their capital to Thebes once more and began some of the most ambitious building projects Egypt had seen in almost a thousand years. To establish Thebes as the capital of the world, they built the temple complexes of Karnak and Luxor. Their massive yet graceful architecture still attracts visitors to this day.

Unlike their predecessors of the Old and Middle Kingdoms, the pharaohs of the New Kingdom dedicated most of their monumental building to temples rather than tombs and pyramids. One explanation for this is that the pharaohs of the New Kingdom did not hold the same absolute power of their predecessors. Another explanation is that the afterlife, once reserved for pharaohs and their families, had gradually become open to all. Even the poorest craftsman could save up enough to be mummified and entombed. The priests of the New Kingdom even wrote a handbook, the *Book of the Dead*, providing the common man with the incantations and instructions necessary to enter the afterlife.

Yet another explanation is that after the looting and destruction of the Hyskos, who were not deterred by the curses of foreign gods, perhaps the pharaohs of Egypt had realized that a massive pyramid is probably not the best place to hide a royal mummy and his accompanying treasures. Instead, the pharaohs of the New Kingdom hid their tombs deep in the earth. Over 500 years, generations of pharaohs would build what we now call the Valley of the Kings, running through the midst of the Theban Necropolis.

The Fall of Egypt

Protected as it was, Egypt was likely the last civilization to fall during the Bronze Age collapse, yet fall it did, finally losing a protracted war against an invader known only as the Sea Peoples. Coming by ship, the Sea Peoples bypassed the deserts that had so long protected

Egypt from invasion.

Egypt lived on, but only as a husk of its former glory, and it soon found itself conquered by other empires: first the Assyrians, then the Persians, then Alexander the Great, then the Romans, then the Turks, then the French (however briefly) and finally the British. Even as a mere imperial province, Egypt's strategic position, its abundant agriculture, its awe-inspiring architecture and its ancient culture continued to make Egypt one of the most important civilizations in the West, with an unbroken history lasting nearly six thousand years.