

Ancient Egyptian Government

Overview For over three millennia the government of Egypt, which first became a united kingdom in 3150 B.C.E., remained relatively stable and true to its original character. The tagline ‘theocratic monarchy’ fits well enough, for this vast period of rule, and though the government experienced significant challenges both within and from without, it remained intact and serviceable for, to take an example, much longer than the long lasting Roman Empire.

The King or Pharaoh While there was a pre dynastic monarchic period, perhaps itself three thousand years in duration, we know rather little about its culture, or about a certain renowned Scorpion King, one of its salient leaders. Our significant understanding of the culture dates from the First Dynasty, 3100-3050 B.C.E., when a king named Narmer (or Menes) unified Upper and Lower Egypt into a single kingdom. The King himself was understood to be the gods’ direct instructional channel for leadership, in all the details of governing. While there were times, in later dynasties, when the King or Pharaoh’s power was compromised by foreign invasion, (especially by the Hyksos), or decentralization from within the country, by and large the King or Pharaoh’s power remained unchallenged through to the reign of Queen Cleopatra, the last Egyptian leader (d. 30 B.C.E.). It might be mentioned, as evidence that the Egyptian King was no figurehead, that one of his chief duties--the *Egyptian Cattle Count*-- was to travel throughout his vast land, assessing the wealth of his kingdom, and especially its agricultural condition, which would be the basis for the treasury’s very substantial annual tax revenue.

Chief government officials The King or Pharaoh had one of two viziers, often relatives and always ‘closely connected to the King,’ who carried out the highest level of administrative decision making. Under this level were *scribes*--indispensable educated readers/writers/accountants, *nomarchs* (governors of provinces); *temple officials*--under whom, at later periods of high temple growth, many social services concerning health, banking, infrastructure projects were gathered; and, after 1570 B.C.E., a sizeable and active police force. The vast temple, pyramid, and precinct structures, from which we are likely to take our first impressions of ancient Egypt, were financed, supervised, and architected through the prosperous temples which were scattered throughout the country. Interwoven with the civilizing and control mechanisms of the temple, there was--especially after the Hyksos invasions of the 13th dynasty (1783-1640 B.C.E.)--a sizeable *military build up*, by which the government could assure itself protection against foreign predations.

Economics and revenue A population of 2-5 million (the best guess out there) had to suffice for financing a huge empire, increasingly under assault from the outside world. The vast majority of the ancient Egyptian population were peasants on the land, and it was they who coughed up the produce that filled the state granaries, and eventually bankrolled the vast military and constructural projects of the government. Thanks to abundance of such revenues one speaks--to pick an example--of the 12th dynasty of the Middle Kingdom (2040-1802 B.C.E.) as the Golden Age of the ancient Egyptian government, in which art and diplomacy flourished, and self-glorifying monuments grew like trees from the gardens of the capitol, Thebes.

Readings

Grimal, Nicolas, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1992.

Clayton, Peter, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs*, London, 1994.

Discussion questions

Discuss the function of the police force--which among other things oversaw morals--in the ancient Egyptian state. Who was chosen for the force, and what kind of training did they get?

What do you see as the relation between religion and government in ancient Egypt? Do you believe the people believed that their ruler was also a god? What would have led them to that belief?

In the first millennium B.C.E. the Egyptians began to adopt a coinage system--as distinct from the different barter systems they had previously used. What effect on governing would this shift to coinage from barter have?