

Chapter 8

The Ancient Egyptian Pharaohs

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will visit ancient Egypt. You will meet four leaders, called pharaohs.

In 1922, archaeologists discovered the tomb of a pharaoh known as King Tutankhaten (too-tan-KAH-tin), or King Tut. Inside a small burial chamber, they found three coffins nested inside each other. The smallest coffin was made of solid gold. It held the king's mummy. (A mummy is a body that has been preserved after death to keep it from decaying.) On the mummy's head was a magnificent golden mask. Jewelry and good luck charms lay on the mummy and in the wrappings that protected it. Other rooms of the tomb were filled with statues, weapons, furniture, and even a chariot.



The treasures in King Tut's tomb provided an amazing glimpse into ancient Egypt. Other pharaohs also left behind fabulous riches and artwork. Many of these pharaohs had great monuments built to celebrate their lives and their accomplishments. Like King Tut's tomb, these artifacts have much to teach us about this ancient civilization.

In this chapter, you will learn about three important periods in ancient Egyptian history. Then you will meet four pharaohs who ruled during these periods, learn what they accomplished, and explore some of the monuments they left behind.

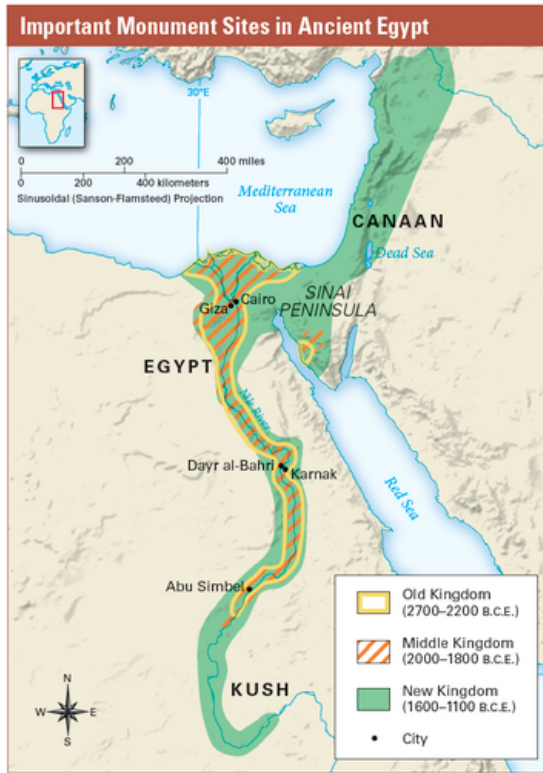
Section 8.2 Ancient Egypt and Its Rulers

Ancient Egypt enjoyed three long periods of stability and unity under the rule of pharaohs. Historians call these periods the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom.

The Old Kingdom lasted from about 2700 to 2200 B.C.E. During this time, early pharaohs set up a strong central government. They also had great pyramids built as tombs for themselves. Some historians call this time the Age of the Pyramids.

The Middle Kingdom (about 2000 to 1800 B.C.E.) is sometimes called the Period of Reunification because it followed years of chaos and disunity. During this era, Egyptians enjoyed many great achievements in literature, art, and architecture.

The New Kingdom (about 1600 to 1100 B.C.E.) is often called Egypt's Golden Age. During this time of peace and stability, ancient Egypt's power reached its height. Pharaohs increased trade and had huge monuments built.



As in Mesopotamia, religion played a central role in Egypt's social and political order. Pharaohs were believed to be gods. They owned all the land and were responsible for their people's well-being. They were kings, generals, and religious leaders, all combined.

After they died, pharaohs were thought to enter an afterlife that would never end. Their tombs were built to last. Many objects were buried with the pharaoh for use in the next world.

The pharaohs built other monuments to glorify their power and success. The map shows the locations of some of the greatest monuments. Let's find out more about these [structures](#) and the pharaohs who ordered their creation.

8.3 Pharaoh Khufu: The Pyramid Builder



The pharaoh Khufu (KOO-foo) ruled from about 2551 to 2528 B.C.E., during the Old Kingdom period. Today, he is best known as the builder of a famous pyramid.

Not much is known about Khufu. Some stories describe him as a cruel, harsh ruler. Others say that he was powerful but kind.

We do know that Khufu helped establish the pharaoh as a central [authority](#). For example, he kept strict control over Egypt's food supply. He oversaw the harvest and the storage of extra grain. He also controlled a

large network of government officials who carried out his laws. Khufu emphasized his supreme power by declaring himself a god.

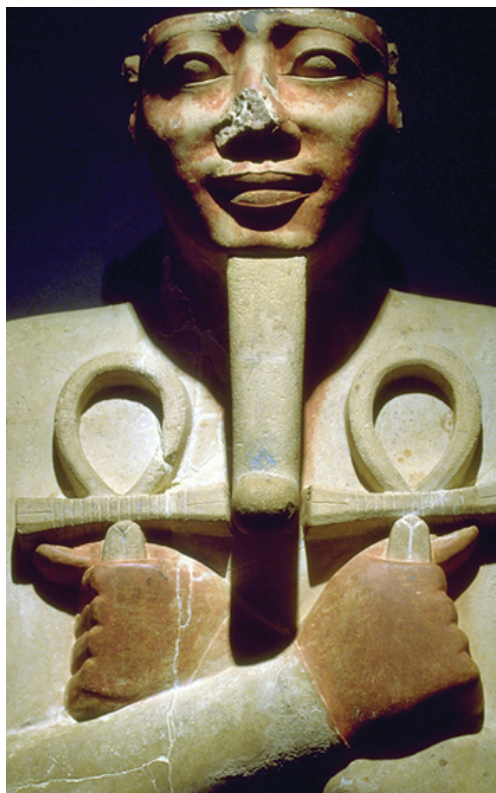
Khufu and other Old Kingdom pharaohs had magnificent pyramids built as tombs for themselves and their families. Khufu was responsible for the building of the Great Pyramid at Giza. It is one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The Great Pyramid sat at the center of a huge complex of temples, statues, monuments, and smaller tombs. It was made of more than 2 million stone blocks, perfectly fitted together. Inside, tunnels led to several burial chambers. The king's chamber had six roofs to hold up the weight of the stone layers above it.

Building the Great Pyramid was an amazing feat. No one knows exactly how the Egyptians did it. The pyramid took about 20 years to complete. Khufu had strict control of the building project. He organized and fed thousands of workers. The finished pyramid was a stunning monument to Egyptian engineering.



8.4 Pharaoh Senusret I: Patron of the Arts



The pharaoh Senusret I (SEHN-oos-ret) ruled from about 1971 to 1926 B.C.E., during the Middle Kingdom. He was a strong leader who ruled a stable, unified Egypt. Art, literature, and architecture flourished during his [reign](#).

The arts thrived under Senusret's rule. The pharaoh controlled mines filled with gold, copper, and gems such as purple amethyst. Artisans fashioned these materials into beautiful pieces of jewelry. Bracelets and necklaces were often highly detailed. They were also decorated with stones like turquoise.

Some of the greatest works in Egyptian literature were written during Senusret's reign. "The Story of Sinuhe" tells of a young official named Sinuhe who overhears a plot to kill the pharaoh. Fearing for his own life, Sinuhe flees Egypt. He thrives in his new land, but he grows very homesick. When a new pharaoh calls him home, Sinuhe returns joyfully to Egypt.

Senusret's greatest accomplishments were in religious architecture. He had many temples, shrines, and religious monuments built and improved.

Perhaps Senusret's finest architectural achievement was the White Chapel. (A chapel is a small temple.) It was made of alabaster, a hard white stone. Some

historians think that the chapel was originally covered in a thin layer of gold.

Beautiful artwork decorated the chapel's pillars. Carved scenes showed the pharaoh with various gods. Birds, animals, and Egyptian symbols were also depicted.

Senusret wanted his memory to live on through his monuments. But few of his buildings survived the passage of time. A later pharaoh took the White Chapel apart and used the pieces

in a monument of his own. Archaeologists later discovered the pieces and reconstructed the White Chapel.

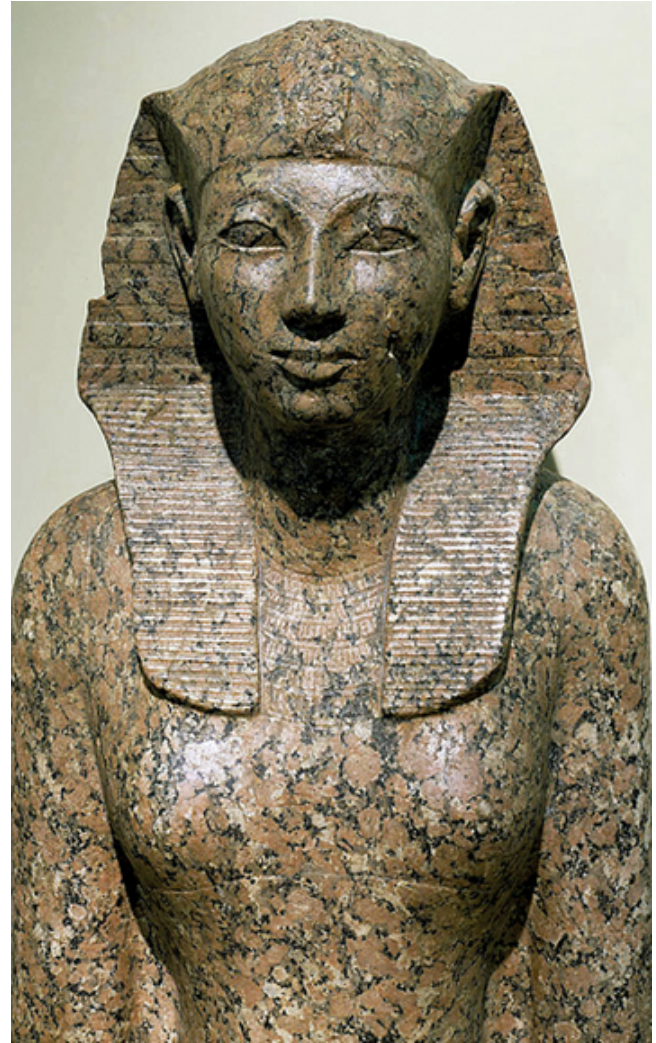
8.5 Pharaoh Hatshepsut: Promoter of Egyptian Trade

During the New Kingdom, the pharaoh [Hatshepsut](#) (haht-SHEP-soot) ruled Egypt from about 1473 to 1458 B.C.E. Hatshepsut was Egypt's first female pharaoh. Under her rule, Egyptian art and architecture flourished. Hatshepsut was also known for encouraging trade.

One of her greatest accomplishments was her rise to power. Never before had a woman pharaoh ruled Egypt. At first, she shared power with her male relatives. However, she soon took over as sole ruler. Hatshepsut strengthened her position in several ways. She filled her government with loyal advisers. She demanded the same respect shown to male rulers. Sometimes, she dressed in men's clothing. She even put on the fake beard worn by male pharaohs. Artists were often instructed to portray her as a man. She also spread stories that her father was a god.

As pharaoh, Hatshepsut promoted trade with other countries. Her biggest trade expedition was to the African kingdom of Punt, at the southern end of the Red Sea. Over 200 men in five ships brought gifts and trade goods to Punt.

Hatshepsut left behind a stunning monument to her reign—a great temple at Dayr al-Bahri (deer ahl-BAH-ray). The main part of the temple was built into a cliff above the Nile River. At the entrance were two tall, thin monuments called *obelisks*. The entrance was also graced by 200 sphinx statues. The sphinx is a mythical creature with the body of a lion and the head of a man. Scenes from Hatshepsut's reign decorated the temple walls. Detailed carvings portrayed the great voyage to Punt. The carvings showed the valuable things that the pharaoh's traders had brought back to Egypt.



8.6 Pharaoh Ramses II: Military Leader and Master Builder



The pharaoh [Ramses II](#) (RAM-seez) ruled from about 1290 to 1224 B.C.E., during the New Kingdom. Called Ramses the Great, he is one of the most famous pharaohs. He reigned for more than 60 years, longer than almost any other pharaoh. He is best known for his military leadership and for building numerous monuments.

Ramses used his power to excess. He had over 100 wives, and more than 100 children. Never shy about his importance, he had hundreds of statues of himself erected throughout Egypt. Some of them were over 60 feet high.

From a young age, Ramses was a fearless soldier. He fought alongside his father in various battles. At the age of ten, Ramses was made a captain in the Egyptian army.

Ramses tried to defend an Egyptian empire that extended north into Canaan. His most famous military campaigns were against the Hittite Empire in Anatolia (present-day Turkey). The Hittites constantly threatened Egypt's northern borders. In his best known battle, Ramses reached a standoff with the Hittites, even though he was greatly outnumbered.

Ramses was also a peacemaker. He and the Hittites signed the world's first peace [treaty](#). This peace lasted until the Hittite Empire collapsed around 1190 B.C.E. One of Ramses' greatest projects was the temple complex at Abu Simbel. The main temple was carved into the side of a cliff. The cliff was on a bank of the Nile River. A smaller temple honored his favorite wife, Nefertari.

Four giant statues of a seated Ramses framed the entrance to the main temple. The figures were carved right out of the rock face of the cliff. They are among the finest examples of the artistic skill of Egyptian sculptors.

The inside of the temple was also remarkable. Visitors passed through three large rooms, called halls, to reach the temple's main room. This room's altar contained statues of Ramses and three Egyptian gods. The temple was built so that, twice a year, the sun lined up with the entrance. Beams of sunlight would shine down the halls and light up the statues.

Ramses ordered more temples and monuments built than any other pharaoh in history. When he died, he was buried in the tomb that he had ordered workers to construct solely for him. His mummy is one of the best-preserved bodies ever found.

