

Pharaoh: King of Egypt

Egypt, land of the pharaohs

Pharaohs ruled Egypt in North Africa from about 3000 BC until the Roman conquest in 30 BC. Behind an apparent unity, many changes – economic, technological, artistic and political – transformed the country. Moreover, power was sometimes shared with invaders coming from mighty nearby kingdoms. In spite of these changes, however, the inherent flexibility of the Egyptian monarchy allowed it to persist for over three millennia. Pharaoh represented the gods on Earth, maintaining maat (universal order) and protecting Egypt from her enemies. This exhibition explores the ideals, beliefs and symbolism of Egyptian kingship, but also seeks to uncover the realities behind these ideas.

Ancient Egyptians recorded years following the reign of each pharaoh. For example, year five of the reign of Ramses II is equivalent to about 1274 BC. In modern times, we are familiar with the system of dynasties (related groups of rulers), which was first created by Manetho, an Egyptian priest who lived during the third century BC. These dynasties were later organised into larger periods of history known as the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms, which are interspersed with Intermediate Periods, during which the state was often not centralised. Ramses II is thus the third pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty, within the New Kingdom.

Born of the Gods

Hundreds of gods were worshipped in ancient Egypt, and the pharaoh was believed to be associated with them in different ways. Ancient myths recount how Egypt was governed by gods before the first pharaoh. The last divine ruler was the hawk-headed god Horus, of whom the pharaoh was considered an incarnation. At his death, each pharaoh transformed into the god Osiris, father of Horus and lord of the underworld. His successor became the new Horus on Earth.

The kings constantly used their relationship to the gods as a proof of their right to reign: they acted as both representatives of the gods and intermediaries between human and divine beings. Images depicting the pharaoh's relationship to the gods cover the walls of ancient Egyptian temples. Scenes of creation mythology are often depicted alongside those showing offerings being made to the gods in return for a fertile Nile flood and a prosperous reign. These offerings could include milk, bread, wine or figurines of the goddess Maat. Depictions of military victories are also shown on temple facades, presenting the pharaoh as a mighty warrior who dominates his enemies.

Symbols of power

Magnificent clothing and elaborate jewellery distinguished the pharaoh from ordinary people. His power was symbolised by a range of different crowns, each with a specific meaning, as well as the uraeus (rearing cobra) placed on his brow. For

example the double crown, a combination of the red crown of Lower Egypt and the white crown of Upper Egypt, indicated his control over the united country.

The pharaoh had a titulary made of a multitude of names, titles and epithets. These held important symbolic meanings and were carefully chosen to indicate devotion to a certain god or connection to a previous ruler. Pharaoh had usually five royal names. Two of these, the throne name and the birth name, were depicted within separate cartouches (oval frames) surrounded by a knotted rope as a form of protection.

Temples: gods, kings and memory

Egyptian temples featured a succession of courtyards, leading to the most sacred area, which only a small number of priests could access. This contained the statue of the main god of the temple.

Temples were essential to the relationship between the pharaoh and the gods, with some being repeatedly extended and modified by successive kings. As High Priest, the pharaoh was expected to perform the most important religious ceremonies such as the daily ritual of offering, clothing and feeding the god. In reality, priests across the country performed these rituals on his behalf. If the gods were pleased, they would reward Egypt with stability and the pharaoh with a long and prosperous reign. Many festivals were celebrated in temples and some were an opportunity for the population to interact with the gods, or at least their statues.

Active remembrance of previous rulers was an important element of Egyptian culture. Some pharaohs were worshipped as saintly figures, who could intervene in day-to-day lives. By contrast, the names of some other pharaohs were erased from official monuments, such as Pharaoh Hatshepsut, whose names were desecrated or omitted by later kings.

Royal life: palace and family

Royal palaces were built all across Egypt. As well as providing living quarters for the royal family, palaces were also the setting for rituals and ceremonies, and included rooms for official guests and foreign visitors. In contrast to temples which were built in stone, palaces were mainly made of sun-dried mudbrick, so few have survived to the modern day. However, colourful inlays and paintings found in some show the original splendour of these places.

Egyptian royal families were very large. The pharaoh would take a principal queen as well as several other wives. Diplomatic alliances were formed or strengthened through marriage with daughters of foreign rulers. Many children were born from these royal unions. Pharaoh Ramses II is believed to have fathered over 40 sons and 40 daughters with several wives.

Managing Egypt: officials and government

Texts surviving from ancient Egypt reveal that the pharaoh ruled over a complex administrative system designed to maintain religious, economic and political control over the country. He was supported by one or two viziers (the highest ranking government officials) to oversee a vast network of scribes, priests and administrators.

In tombs and temples across the land, high officials recorded their lives and their most important acts. They often exaggerated their personal skills and participation in events, and wrote about what brought them wealth and power. Very little is known of ordinary people or those who held lower positions. The vast majority of Egyptians were farmers who were not provided with lavish burials: their names remain unknown.

War and diplomacy

Defending Egypt and building an empire were central obligations of the pharaoh. Temple façades were covered with scenes of the pharaoh as a warrior, fighting in battles and crushing enemies. Although the pharaohs were usually depicted as victorious, the reality was often very different, if less well-documented. Egypt frequently suffered periods of civil war and was invaded many times by foreign armies. Nubians, Persians, Libyans, Greeks and Romans all attacked and ruled the country at different times. These facts are usually absent from the official version of events, instead being described in private documents which sometimes mention battles that were lost.

Military action was not the only way that Egypt encountered its neighbours; diplomatic alliances were also an important part of managing foreign relations. Exchanges of gifts and political marriages were used to help maintain peaceful relationships with neighbours.

Foreigners on the throne

Egypt experienced several invasions and periods when foreign powers ruled the country. During these times, most foreign kings adopted the iconography and traditions of ancient Egypt, depicting themselves as pharaohs and taking royal titles and regalia. This approach sought to appease the local population. Some were interested in the history and beliefs of the country and copied art and traditions that were already centuries old.

Foreign kings maintained traditional religious beliefs by showing devotion to Egyptian gods. Greek kings and Roman Emperors were great builders of temples dedicated to Egyptian gods, in which they represented themselves as traditional pharaohs. However, these rulers also continued to worship their own gods in their native countries where they were rarely depicted as pharaohs

An eternal life: the death of pharaoh

At his death, the pharaoh was believed to journey to the underworld. Magical texts, spells, tomb decorations and burial equipment would provide the pharaoh with everything needed for the journey. On arrival, the pharaoh would be assimilated with the god Osiris, lord of the dead, ruler of the underworld, and one of the mythical rulers of Egypt before the arrival of mankind. In death, the pharaoh was also associated with other gods, including the solar god Ra. Like the sun, the pharaoh would travel each night through the underworld to be reborn every day at dawn.

To help the pharaoh on his journey to a new and eternal life, a grand tomb was constructed to hold his body. Building would start very early in his reign to make sure everything was ready at his death. The structure of royal tombs changed throughout history. Pyramids were built during the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Later, tombs were dug into the hillside of the Valley of the Kings in Thebes to disguise the actual location of the tombs and their precious contents. Each tomb was finely decorated with protective magical texts and descriptions of rituals. Despite all these precautions, almost all the tombs were looted, mostly during antiquity.

Many valuable objects were deposited in royal tombs, including furniture, jewellery and food. They demonstrated the wealth and magnificence of the pharaoh and were supposed to address his needs for eternity. To preserve his body, the pharaoh was mummified (embalmed and wrapped) during a process that took around 70 days. Today, most of the royal mummies are in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

Egypt and her geography

Egypt has always been defined by the river Nile, which flows from Upper Egypt in the south to Lower Egypt in the north, where it fans into a delta with several channels running into the Mediterranean Sea. Beyond the Nile valley, the land gives way to arid desert.

The land surrounding the Nile was very fertile, thanks to the silt deposited by the river's annual floods. Ancient Egyptians found ways to channel the water of the Nile, making year-round agriculture possible.

The Nile was also the main transport route in Egypt, although cataracts made journeys difficult in the south, as boats had to be unloaded and carried around the dangerous rapids. This did not deter expeditions from travelling to distant lands in search of valuable and exotic goods, such as ebony and elephant tusks. Often commanded by royal decree, these expeditions were essential to the prestige of the pharaohs. Donkeys were used to carry goods along caravan routes across the deserts surrounding the Nile valley, where stones and precious metals were mined.

Upper and Lower Egypt were once known as the Two Lands and, in times of stability, they were ruled as one country. A strong pharaoh was necessary to control such a vast territory and help keep peace with its many neighbours: Nubians in the south, Libyans in the west, and the states of Hatti, Mitanni, Assyria and Persia in the north-east. The relationship with these peoples and states changed over three millennia, from enemies to allies. Depending on the outcomes of Egyptian military campaigns and diplomacy, the borders of the pharaohs' empire shifted.

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