

Histories

Unit 3 of 5

Egypt has fascinated people from the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans who visited there until our own day. If we haven't been there, we read about it and try to imagine the landscape, the monuments, and the way of life.

ANCIENT EGYPT



Learning the facts about the history and culture of ancient Egypt has been a slow, meticulous process carried out by archeologists, linguists, art historians, and many others. The excitement began in 1798 when Napoleon invaded Egypt hoping to find an easy way to defeat the British in India. The British sunk his navy in the Mediterranean Sea, and his army was stranded there for three years. In the process of collecting stones to build a fortification near the town of Rosetta in the Nile Delta, French soldiers found a flat, black stone inscribed with three parallel lines of script. The text turned out to be a single decree written in three different languages: Greek (which was well known in Europe), Egyptian hieroglyphs, and another Egyptian script. Until that time, scholars had been unable to understand Egyptian writing. Now, by comparing the Greek to the hieroglyphs, scholars deciphered the pictorial language and opened up the ancient civilization in a way that it had never been before.

1. Which civilization's language would you like to be able to decipher?

The hieroglyphic script is a kind of pictorial writing. That is, pictures are used instead of letters. Below is an extremely crude example:



Meaning, "I see you". (Eye -- Sea -- Ewe)

2. Try writing your own hieroglyphic sentence and then translate it.

"Egypt is the gift of the river," said one of the early Greek visitors there. He was talking about the immensely fertile Nile valley, which runs through the desert and nourished 5,000 years of Egyptian civilization. In the summer, tributaries to the Nile filled it with run-off from tropical rain. The river would flood, covering the land with rich soil. When the water went down, fields were planted, especially in wheat and barley. Harvest was in March. A period of drought followed until the summer floods came again.

The river was navigable all the way to Aswan where there was a huge waterfall, called the first Cataract. Boats would sail upstream with the north wind, and then come back to the Delta with the current. So, communication and trade were easy.



3. What other natural feature besides a river could help build a civilization?

At first, little towns were scattered up and down the river, maintaining themselves by farming. Then they grew bigger and were ruled by chieftains. They traded up and down the river and grew richer. Eventually, as power became more centralized, there were two kingdoms: Upper (that is, downstream as far as Aswan) and Lower Egypt (the Delta area). Around 3000 BCE, the whole length of the valley was united under one king called a Pharaoh. It was the beginning of a centralized kingship that lasted for 3,000 years. The state controlled everything: agriculture, labor, trade, and an efficient army. It collected taxes in labor or in goods since there was no money.

4. What do you think about the system of collecting goods and labor, instead of money, for taxes?

There was no constitution or code of laws as there is now in the U.S. and most of Europe. Instead, law was based on inherited tradition or on the immediate will of the reigning Pharaoh. He called all the shots, more like a modern dictator. Justice was his to decide. Strict ritual made his life orderly. In the Pharaoh's day, said a Greek observer, "There was a set time not only for his holding audience or rendering judgment, but even for his taking a walk, bathing, and sleeping with his wife."

5. What are the advantages and disadvantages to living under such a strict and all-powerful ruler? Explain.

What made possible the long continuation of this highly developed and orderly society? A very important element was a yearning for order that was expressed in a religion that showed itself in every aspect of society. Egyptians believed that the rule of the Pharaoh and the power of the gods could give guidance and comfort to individuals and make order out of chaos. And they had good reason to want protection from chaos because, although there were long periods of prosperity, their absolute dependence on nature for survival made their civilization especially vulnerable, as simple cultures are today. There were times of terrible drought, wild floods, war, and devastating illnesses over which they had no control.

6. Where in the world today are people especially vulnerable to the following (pick two)?

- (a) devastating floods
- (b) droughts and famines
- (c) war
- (d) illness

Egyptians worshiped many gods, each with a particular function. There were local gods, household gods who protected children and helped with fertility and childbirth, an earth god, and a sky goddess. The array of gods and goddesses was called a *pantheon*. One of the most famous gods, because he was the first divine patron and supporter of the Pharaoh as well as the protector of the dead, was Horus. He had the body of a man and the head of a falcon or hawk. He stood strong, straight, and tall, and his hawk's head was bright eyed and alert.

7. Make up a different god. What is his/her name and function? Sketch a picture.

As important to daily life as all these gods were, it was the sun god that ruled over everyone. Reverence for the sun god evolved slowly and took different forms over the thousands of years of Egyptian history. His name was Re, and his appearance is associated with colorful mythology. One story is that, in the beginning, he took the form of a mythical *Bennu* bird and alighted on the *benben*, the pillar where all creation began. Another story is that he came in a huge egg laid by a goose called the "great Cackler." When the egg opened, there was Re, and he proceeded to create all of the world.

8. Make up a story of how the god you created in Question 7 was "born".

Over time, the worship of Re began to mix with the cult of the Pharaoh. Re became the monarch of the heavens, and the Pharaoh was his representative on earth. At the height of the cult, each successive Pharaoh was declared "Son of Re." An annual procession between two shrines beside the Nile celebrated the Pharaoh's having received the "Ka" or spiritual essence of Re. Re's birth in the morning, his death at night, and resurrection again in the morning was the model for the Pharaoh's own life, death, and resurrection and became the inspiration for most of the monuments that we associate with Egypt.



There was a firm belief in an after-life and wish to exalt the mighty and powerful that lay behind the construction of the pyramids, huge temples, and tombs built along the Nile. The temples were memorials and places of worship containing statues and paintings, and the pyramids were tombs built to symbolize the slanting rays of the sun. "I have laid down for myself those rays of yours as a stairway under my feet on which I will ascend," a Pharaoh told the Sun God. Inside was his mummified body, and outside was the ladder for his soul to climb to eternal life and union with the sun. And it all was built to last forever.

9. Give three reasons why people might have revered the sun God above others.

Some of the most spectacular monuments are at Giza, just below the Nile Delta. The great pyramid there covers thirteen acres, is four hundred eighty feet high, and is made of two million limestone blocks weighing some fifteen tons each. Nearby is the famous Sphinx with the head plus royal beard and head dress of Pharaoh Khafre and the body of a reclining lion regally guarding the area.



Let's turn back to the Egyptian belief in the afterlife for a moment. So much that is preserved in the pyramids and temples is directly connected to those beliefs. The preservation of bodies as mummies is one example. The Egyptians believed that at death, the spirit flew up and away to find eternal life among the stars, but it was important to preserve the body so that the person's spiritual essence, the "Ka," could return for visits. The process of mummification took two or three months. The body was washed and purified and the organs taken out except for the heart. Then the corpse was soaked in salty water for forty days after which it was covered with melted resins and finally wrapped with up to four hundred forty square yards of linen. For the richest people, semi-precious stones were fixed to the wrapping, and sometimes a mask was placed over the face. After all was done, the ritual mourning began.

10. Do you think it is best to mummify a body, bury it in a casket, or cremate it? Support your choice.

The other vivid reminders of the belief in the afterlife that remain are the paintings and the household furnishings that are preserved in pyramids and temples. Because they wanted to recreate everyday life for the returning spirit of the dead, Egyptians painted scenes showing how they lived, and they filled their tombs with all the necessary implements such as furniture, food, and wine to make the spirit feel at home. As a result, archeologists have innumerable treasures with which to reconstruct Egyptian life. There are dolls with moveable arms and legs and crocodiles with flexible jaws for children. For adults there are board games, as well as paintings of ball games and acrobatics. There are weapons: shields, bows, daggers, axes, and toy weapons for war-like little boys! Wall paintings were made for information and in a very distinctive style: head in profile, eyes and shoulders to the front, the lower body in profile like the face. We can see men wearing short, stiff linen kilts and women clad in linen sheaths wearing eye shadow and rouge.

Despite these elaborate burials, the vast majority of the people of Egypt were poor and hard working. Reading and writing were only for the elite. Traveling and trading and being mummified in elaborate tombs were only for Pharaohs and some of the rich. And, like other prosperous rulers, they looked down on foreigners calling them insulting names like "the wretched Asiatics" and "the vile Kushites."

11. Write a poem about Egyptian artifacts, Pharaohs, mummification, or the poor people of Egypt.

The life style of this small upper class was maintained by innumerable workers, both skilled and unskilled. There were the bakers, weavers, basket-makers, musicians, and artists who made up a highly complex society. And there were the farmers who worked the fields as well as the vast numbers of laborers who built the pyramids. Until recently, these laborers were assumed to have been slaves. But recent research shows that they were both skilled and semi-skilled workers who lived in small cities close to the pyramids where they ate well and worked hard. Can you imagine how they hauled and lifted the huge stones to build walls higher and higher without tractors and mechanical lifts? One solution was to wet down mud and build a muddy track so that they could slide the stones up the side of the pyramid.

12. What is another solution to hauling these huge stones to the building site and up the walls?

WRITING

In the story of humankind, writing is a relatively recent phenomenon which brings together many recorded histories. People have been chatting away for 100,000 years, because language and speech are innate. We are born with the need and ability to communicate. We learn to talk by the time we are two years old, but writing is learned. It is a technology which was only invented about 5,400 years ago. Before that, we have no record of names, loves, hates, hopes, fears, beliefs, property transactions, or shopping lists. All those people who couldn't write are lost to us except in some cases when art work, such as cave paintings, were left behind.

Writing has many definitions, one being, "A system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey any and all thought in any language." In addition, a true writing system must use characters that convey both meaning and sound, so that you can understand it and know how to say it.

13. Describe an experience of learning to write either as a child or as an adult, learning your first language or a new language.

Although there are many places in the world where people are unable to read and write and don't need to, especially in predominantly agricultural societies. In the U.S., people that cannot read and write are considered handicapped. Signs and ads and posters tell us what to do and where to go. We must fill out forms and apply for jobs, all in writing. Reading and writing are necessary for us just to function in society.

14. How would you try to communicate with someone if they spoke a different language?

Writing and speech are both ways for us to communicate with one another. But they do differ. Speech is not permanent. It fades away and is gone forever. Writing is permanent and it "separates speech from the speaker, thought from the thinker." That is, once a thought is recorded, it can be examined later, reexamined and interpreted. It has become independent of the speaker.

15. Think of some instances where speech doesn't fade instantly.

16. Which mode of communication do you prefer -- speaking or writing? Why?

Because of what it has meant to history and to civilization itself, writing has been said to be the most important invention ever made by humankind. However, writing's appearance seems extraordinary. Contemporary scholars agree that it has only appeared three times in all of history: in Mesopotamia some 5,400 years ago, in China about 3,500 years ago, and in the civilization of the Maya in Central America about 3,000 years ago. These three systems arose independently without outside influence.

17. Name three other world-changing inventions. Pick one and explain how the world would be different without it.

Although these systems are very different in their styles and in the way that they are designed to be read, they do have one thing in common. They were created in highly developed civilizations and were immediately useful to their creators.

Mesopotamian Writing

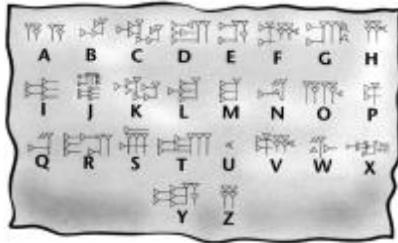
Mesopotamia means "the land between rivers," in this case, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Gradually, during the 3000s BCE as a result of fertile soil, irrigation canals, and trade up and down the rivers, prosperity increased and the population boomed. Cities and towns sprang up during these centuries. The greatest city was Uruk in Sumeria, the southern part of Iraq, which eventually became Babylonia. It was the city of Gilgamesh, the historical and then legendary King. In the last lines of the Epic of Gilgamesh, he introduces a visitor to his city: "This is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal...walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations...see the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the ships and marketplace, the houses, the public squares." Such a city demanded sophisticated organization and an accounting system. Very likely the needs of this huge city are what led to the invention of writing there, rather than any longing for great literature.

18. Imagine that you are a tradesman in Uruk. Why would you want to learn to write?

One scholar believes that the writing system, rather than developing gradually, "was designed in one fell swoop." The evidence appeared quite suddenly in a layer of excavation where clay tablets with writing on them were found. Earlier layers were filled with other artifacts, but no writing. He thinks that the skill of writing could have been created by one person or a small group in Uruk. More and more scholars believe this is what happened, although a few disagree.

19. Write an essay by the scholar who developed the "one fell swoop" idea. Try to convince your colleagues of your belief.

The surface used for writing was clay, a natural medium since it was everywhere. There were few trees and little stone, and so bricks made of clay were used for all kinds of needs, such as building houses, temples, palaces, roads, and even toys. When Sumerians wanted to write, the medium was right at hand. Wet clay was shaped in a mold like a small brick, written on with a sharp reed and baked in the sun or fired. The wedge-shaped script called cuneiform covered thousands of tablets, which are still being discovered. The writing was by line and read from left to right.



The system spread rapidly from Uruk throughout Mesopotamia and much of the Middle East. And it lasted for 3,000 years, ultimately influencing the development of Hebrew and Arabic.

The Earliest Chinese Writing

There is a legend about the beginning of Chinese writing. Its creator was said to be a man named Cangjie. Cangjie saw a divine being whose face was lined in a way that suggested writing to him. From that vision, he created the earliest writing. Then suddenly, the heavens opened and grains of luscious millet poured down. But at night, spirits howled, mourning the loss of the divine secret to Cangjie.

No one truly knows how it all began, but the earliest evidence of Chinese writing comes from about 1500 BCE in the era of the Shang Dynasty. The writing was found near the modern province of Henan in the Yellow River valley. The civilization was strong, hierarchical, and engaged in constant conquering warfare. The first inscriptions were used to promote the hierarchy and to encourage military campaigns by means of divination or foretelling the future. Writing was painted on dry animal bones and turtle shells, which were heated until cracks formed. Then Shang court diviners would interpret the pattern formed by the cracks to predict the future. It all sounds magical, and yet it was an effective tool for the government, which used it to further its imperial aims.



20. Imagine you are a Shang court diviner. Write a letter to the government explaining your interpretation of the meaning found in the cracks in a turtle shell.

Later in the dynasty, the inscriptions were carved into bronze ritual vessels and later still painted onto bamboo strips, which were tied together to form a roll. The writing by this time (500 BCE) contained historical and administrative records as well as some philosophical reflection, but the script was basically the same. It consisted of logograms or pictures, which represented a word. Gradually the pictures became less representational and contained signs to guide pronunciation. It was arranged in columns, which were read from top to bottom, as is Chinese writing today. The script evolved with Chinese culture and became the basis of a whole family of languages known as Sinitic, which includes Japanese and Korean. Unlike Mesopotamian writing, which has disappeared, the earliest Chinese writing has endured and been adapted to a changing world.

The Writing System of the Maya

The Maya lived in what is now southeastern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. There was a great and powerful civilization, the longest lasting in the Americas. The Maya ruled from about 300 BCE until the last Mayan city was conquered by Spain in 1697 CE, although the nation had begun to weaken and loosen the ties between some areas before that. The height of the culture with its grandeur of architecture and sculpture lasted from about 300 until 900 CE.

Like the earliest Chinese writing, the Mayan system was used as a tool to promote the power of a hierarchical and warlike civilization. Early texts refer to rulers, their births and deaths, their enthronements, their parentage, and the capture of their enemies. Later texts contain material more related to daily living, such as astronomical charts, calendars, and references to medicinal plants. There may or may not have been a literature with poetry or drama. If there was, it is gone, destroyed by the zeal of the Spanish conquerors eager to convert the Native Americans and transform their civilization.

21. When two civilizations join (or one is conquered), do you think they should keep their separate languages, convert to one of the languages, or create a whole new language? Explain.

There were many Mayan languages, but it was probably the Ch'olan and the Tzeltan peoples who invented the writing system. The script contained both logograms and syllabograms (signs which express sounds). The reader begins with two images at the top (1 and then 2), then moves to the two images just below (3 and 4) and so on down to the bottom of the columns. The next move is to the top of another double column.



22. Why do you think we read from left to right, top to bottom? Write something in a different format and explain the new method.

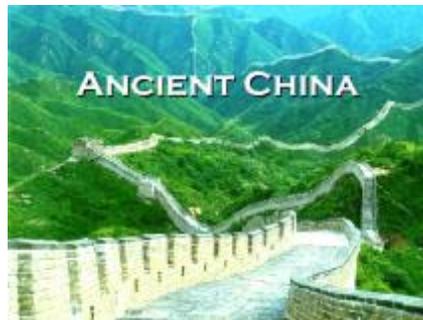
The decipherment of the Mayan script is very much a work in progress. At first the inscriptions were not recognized as writing and were thought to be merely decorative. Only in 1950 did serious deciphering begin. The earliest inscriptions were carved on stone, written on bark or wood or jade, and sometimes on ceramics. Later, there were manuscripts called *codexes*. They were books written on parchment made from the bark of the Amate tree. Three books survived the Spanish destruction. One is called the Dresden codex and is now in the National Museum of Archeology in Guatemala, donated by the museum in Dresden, Germany in October of 2007. It is devoted to astronomical information.

We have finished a short description of three kinds of writing invented by three civilizations, which were far apart in time and space, without any known outside influence. We have seen that each system was useful to the society in which it arose. But why that society, in that time? That remains a mystery and something of a miracle.

23. Can you think of other circumstances that would inspire the creation of writing? Explain.



Mesopotamia



Ancient China



Maya

Of the three systems of writing we have looked at, only the Chinese system is in current use. Today, every other language uses an alphabet, another ancient form of writing in which only one single sign represents a single sound, i.e. A is for the sound "ah", B is for "bee", etc. The inspiration for this development probably came from the study of Egyptian hieroglyphics by a Middle Eastern speaker, very likely a Phoenician in about 1000 BCE. Because of its simplicity and versatility, it spread rapidly and is the basis of the Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, English, and many more writing systems.

24. Now, we have computers, the Internet, and texting, which have revolutionized writing and communication around the world in only a few decades' time. Discuss how this affects one of the following:

- (a) education
- (b) commerce
- (c) culture

25. Write a comic strip about an ancient Egyptian family (such as family with young children, retired Egyptian, man with his dog, etc..)

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

**Appendix
Histories: Unit 3 of 5**

Citations

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