

Ancient Egypt: An Introduction

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1 Egypt's name and historical framework

The name *Egypt* derives from the Greek *Aigyptos*, which came from *Het-ka-Ptah*, “House of the Spirit of Ptah”, the great temple of Ptah at Memphis. For much of pharaonic history, the Egyptians called their own country *Kemet*, “Black Land”, as we shall see later in this article, or *Ta-mery*, “Beloved Country”. Modern Egyptians, who speak Arabic, usually refer to the country even more simply as *Misr*, “the country”, which is a usage from the Qur'an.

One of the most often-cited sources of historical data for ancient Egypt is Manetho. This man was a native of Lower Egypt in the 3rd century BCE¹, during the reign of Ptolemy II.² He was a priest at Heliopolis, a center of Egyptian scholarship, and for the king he wrote a history of Egypt. Unfortunately, we no longer have Manetho's original history; all we have are excerpts from his works quoted by later historians such as Africanus (300 CE) and Eusebius (340 CE). Africanus and Eusebius do not even agree between themselves on all details, so six centuries of distance from Manetho took their toll, aside from the errors we must assume his original work contained. In fact, Eusebius in turn is known from two later copyists, and *they* disagree!

Nevertheless, it was Manetho who gave us the traditional breakdown of pharaonic Egypt into the Thirty Dynasties, and he included with each dynasty the location in Egypt from which that ruling family came. To a certain degree, then, all of modern Egyptology builds on Manetho: correcting the errors and filling in the missing details of his history. Some modern scholars label the periods of Egyptian history after native rulership ended as additional dynasties, appended to Manetho's original thirty.

2 The problem of precise dating

It is very difficult to provide exact modern dates of events in Egyptian history. Major events in Egyptian history are not always attested in the records of its neighbors, and vice versa. So for much of pharaonic history, we can't really hold up Egypt next to another civilization and say “Oh look, Pharaoh So-and-So took the throne the same year King Such-and-Such of Assyria married his third wife.” We have far too few examples of this sort of thing.

To make matters worse, unlike (for example) the Romans and the Maya, the Egyptians don't seem to have cared much for keeping track of long-term dates, at least not in a convenient unified format. Dates are invariably recorded in terms of the regnal year of the current pharaoh, so every time a new pharaoh took the throne, the counter was reset to “1”.

Fortunately for Egyptologists, the Egyptians *did* keep meticulously detailed lists of the pharaohs—presumably used by Manetho in compiling his history—including the length of their reigns and their lives, and these numbers are often given to the precision of days, not merely years. Given the few correlations we have between events in Egypt and events in other civilizations, we should then be able to refer to the king-lists and count backwards from known dates: laborious, but reliable. Right?

¹Throughout these lecture notes, the terms “Before the Common Era” (BCE) and “Common Era” (CE) are used instead of the traditional *B.C.* and *A.D.*

²Emery, Walter Bryan. *Archaic Egypt*. Penguin Books, 1961, p. 23.

There are several reasons why this is not so simple. For one thing, the Egyptians practiced historical revisionism from time to time. Less than one hundred years after the reign of King Tut, an official list of the pharaohs was carved on the wall of a temple at Abydos, and the boy king's name is nowhere to be found.³ Less interestingly but more substantially, the king-lists which have survived are, in general, not in very good shape. There are obvious places where the papyrus is torn, the stone is crumbled, and so forth.

Another source of confusion is that kings of Egypt took as many as five different names, as we shall consider in detail when we study Egyptian writing. The earliest kings of Egypt are known by their "Horus" names, which used the name of the god Horus as a mark of divinity. Thus we have kings called "the Horus Narmer", "the Horus Semerkhet", and so forth. Sometimes (as in the case of the Scorpion King) a name is inscribed without any glyphs to indicate *which* of the king's names is being used. And worst of all, which one of the names was used by Manetho as "*the*" name varies from dynasty to dynasty and sometimes from king to king.

3 A capsule summary of Egyptian history

The dates in this table, and as far as possible all ancient dates given in this course, are after John Baines and Jaromír Málek in their *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, which is a popular choice for this purpose among Egyptologists in recent years. The dynastic breakdown of the periods is my own. Notable points of dissent on this table include which periods the 3rd and 13th Dynasties should be placed in.

PERIOD	DYNASTIES	DATES
Predynastic Period	Before 1st	to 2920 BCE
Archaic Period	1st–2nd	2920–2649
Old Kingdom	3rd–6th	2649–2150
1st Intermediate Period	7th–11th	2150–2010
Middle Kingdom	11th–13th	2010–1640
2nd Intermediate Period	14th–17th	1640–1550
New Kingdom	18th–20th	1550–1070
3rd Intermediate Period	21st–25th	1070–712
Late Period	25th–“31st”	712–332
Ptolemaic Period	“32nd”	332–30
Roman Period	“33rd”	30 BCE–395 CE

4 What's in a Name?

Egyptology is complicated by the fact that its primary sources are written in three languages no longer in use by much of the world: ancient Egyptian itself,⁴ classical Greek, and Coptic. As we shall see when we study the Egyptian language, it can be difficult to choose a readable yet accurate Roman rendition of Egyptian names.⁵

It's much easier to write Greek texts with the Roman alphabet than Egyptian ones, but the problem with this is that Greek lacks some of the sounds found in Egyptian (such as the initial sounds of the English words *ship*, *church*, and *just*), and has different rules for how sounds can be arranged in words (only a very few letters can end a word, for example), so we find that the Greek version of a name is often very different from the original Egyptian.

Geographical names provide even more problems, because each culture tends to give each place a different name. The Egyptian *ỉwnw* (*Iunu*), the Greek *Heliopolis*, the Hebrew *Aven*, and the

³We will consider the reason for this when we discuss the 18th Dynasty in detail.

⁴And ancient Egyptian, in turn, is written in more than one script, as we shall see later on.

⁵As for Russian Egyptologists and others who use Cyrillic, they have the advantage that their alphabet has some of the Egyptian sounds which our alphabet is not too good with, but on the other hand, most of the modern literature of the subject is in French, German, and English, so they have to deal with *other* transliteration problems.

Biblical *On* are all names for the same place, just outside the city the Arabic-speaking residents call *el-Qahira* and we English-speakers call *Cairo*.

Yet another source of confusion is our own understanding of the ancient Egyptian language, which has increased dramatically since the early attempts at deciphering hieroglyphs. The basic ordering of components in some names has been changed; in others, we find sounds missing because complex glyphs have been misread. For example, in some older Egyptological texts, we find “Useratesen” instead of “Senwosret”, or “Sakara” instead of “Smenkhare”.

Over the years I have settled in my own mind what versions I like of various Egyptian names, the ones that leap to my mind first, and into which I translate all the other variants as I read. These will naturally be the names I use in lecture. Therefore, I’ve compiled this handy table which gives you both the Classical and the Egyptian versions of names (in a normal Roman typeface for simplicity at present) and I’ve noted my preference in **boldface**. It would be hard to explain why I prefer some of the versions I prefer; most likely, it usually goes back to which version I saw first.

Names of Places

CLASSICAL	EGYPTIAN	ARABIC ⁶
Abydos	Abedju	(various sites)
Alexandria	Raqote	el-Iskandariya
Avaris	Pi-Riameses	Tell el-Dab‘a
Bubastis	Per-Bastet	Tell Basta
Buto	Pe, Per-Wadjet	Tell el-Fara‘in
Eileithiaspolis	Nekheb	el-Kab
Heliopolis	Iunu	el-Qahira (Cairo) ⁷
Herakleopolis	Henen-Nesut	Ihnasya el-Medina
Hermontis	Iuny	Armant
Hermopolis	Khemenu	el-Ashmunein
Hierakonpolis	Nekhen	Kom el-Ahmar
Khemmis	Khent-Min	Akhmim
Memphis	Men-nefer, etc.	(various sites)
Mendes	Djedet	Tell el-Rub‘a
Moeris	Sha-resy	el-Faiyum
Ombos	Nubt	Naqada , Tukh
Saïs	Zau	Sa el-Hagar
Syene ⁸	Swenet	Aswan
Tanis	Djanet	San el-Hagar ⁹
Thebes	Waset	(various sites)
(no name ¹⁰)	Akhetaten	Tell el-‘Amarna

⁶The Roman alphabet versions of the Arabic names are all from Baines, John, and Málek, Jaromír. *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*. Facts on File, 1989.

⁷“Sort of.” Cairo is a sprawling city and while Heliopolis is in the northern suburbs, other important sites such as Giza are very near as well. It would be more accurate to say that Cairo spans the region from Heliopolis to Memphis.

⁸The classical name for the island next to this city is Elephantine, and this is the best-known name in the area, but I for the city itself I favor the Arabic name.

⁹Yes, very much like the name two rows above it. This is not a typo.

¹⁰Akhetaten has no Classical name because it had been forgotten by Classical times and only rediscovered in the modern era. Also, while I prefer the Egyptian name for the city, the unusual artistic style found there is consistently referred to as *Amarnan* art in Egyptological literature. Hence I have marked both names as “preferred.”

Names of Deities

CLASSICAL	EGYPTIAN
Ammon	Amun
Anubis	Anpu
Hathor	Het-heru
Horus	Heru
Isis	Aset
Nephthys	Nebt-het
Osiris	Wasayar
Seth	Sutekh; later Set
Thoth	Djehuty

Names of Pharaohs

CLASSICAL	EGYPTIAN
Amenophis	Amenhotep ¹¹
Ammenemes	Amenemhat
Amosis	Ahmose
Cheops	Khufu
Chephren	Khafre
Harmais	Horemheb
Mycerinus	Menkaure
Phiops	Pepi
Sesostris	Senwosret
Tuthmosis	Djehutymose ¹²

5 The geography of ancient Egypt

Egypt has often been called “the gift of the Nile”, and with good reason. The Nile, the longest river in the world,¹³ winds its way north from the mountains in east central Africa on up to the Mediterranean Sea. Every year (until more sophisticated dams and irrigation sluices were built in the mid-19th century), rainfall in the tropical belt and the summer monsoons of Ethiopia¹⁴ caused the Nile to flood. As it flowed, it picked up rich soil from central Africa and deposited it on the banks of its valley in Egypt, and its delta at the Mediterranean. This produced a layer of excellent topsoil which gave the ancient Egyptians their agriculture and thus their life. It is because of this fertile mud that the Egyptians called their country *Kemet*, “Black Land” (to contrast it with *Deshret*, “Red Land”, the desert which surrounded it), and why in Egyptian magic and symbolism, black is not a color of death, but of life.

The map at the end of this article shows the overall layout of ancient Egypt. The dominant feature is of course the Nile. The two main geographic divisions of ancient Egypt—Upper and Lower Egypt¹⁵—can also be seen, along with the region of Nubia to the south.

Lower Egypt contains a great many marshes and much more rich land. This is due to the numerous branches of the Nile which run through the area—many more than are shown on the map, for the sake of simplicity—and the presence of the lake el-Faiyum, which forms the “leaf” of the Nile near Herakleopolis. Lower Egypt is also very flat, being mostly comprised of the Nile delta. Upper

¹¹Despite preferring *Amun* in the name of the god when it stands alone, I prefer *Amen* when it’s part of a name, owing to how the inference of Egyptian vowels from Coptic inscriptions has been accomplished.

¹²In this case I prefer **Thutmose** over both the Greek and the Egyptian, because *Thut-* sounds more like “Thoth”, my preferred variant of that deity’s name, while preserving the Egyptian *-mose*, and the weird backwardness of *Tuth-* doesn’t do anyone any good. The editors at *KMT: A Modern Journal of Ancient Egypt* and various other scholars use this version as well. An additional variant is out there too: “Thothmes.”

¹³Except possibly the Amazon, depending on where you pinpoint their sources.

¹⁴Baines and Málek, pp. 14–15.

¹⁵Though the division was ancient, these terms are modern and derive from the fact that Upper Egypt is “upstream” on the Nile and accordingly higher in elevation.

Egypt is “narrower”, having less cultivated land as the Nile is a single stream flowing through the land, and is much more mountainous.

The ancient Egyptians divided their country into forty-two districts called *nomes*. A kiosk built by Senwosret I at Karnak records the lengths along the Nile which determined the nomes of Upper Egypt, twenty-two in number. Temples at Edfu and Dendara contained lists of the twenty Lower Egyptian nomes. Most of the well-known cities we will refer to during this course, such as Thebes, Heliopolis, Memphis, Hermopolis, Nekhen, and Tanis, were the capitals of their nomes.

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