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ended in turmoil either after a period of fighting or after being invaded. There were more than 30 dynasties in Egypt during the Early Dynastic Period. Dynasties helped keep Egypt united, which was no easy task. Leaders faced periods of chaos, ambitious rivals, and also foreigners who wanted to conquer the region. All pharaohs wore beards — even female rulers, as shown by this bust of Hatshepsut. The Earliest Dynasties Beginning in about 4,000 B.C.E., all of Egyptian society existed in two kingdoms, Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Around 3,100 B.C.E., Menes, the king of Upper Egypt, started the long string of dynasties by conquering Lower Egypt. He unified the regions and built his capital city at Memphis, near the border of these two kingdoms. Because Memphis was located on an island in the Nile, it was easy to defend. So began the first dynasty, an age appropriately called the Early Dynastic Period. Little is known of the pharaohs (rulers) of the early dynasties. The Egyptian word "pharaoh" literally means "great house." Pharaohs were more than just rulers. They were considered gods and were believed to possess the secrets of heaven and earth. Pharaohs led the government and the army and wielded unlimited power. The step pyramid of Netjerikhet in Saqqara (left) believed to have been the first pyramid constructed in Egypt, was completed in the 27th century B.C.E. during the Third Dynasty. Pyramid building progressed through the dynasties, culminating in the Pyramids of Giza (right). About 300 years after Menes united Egypt, its rulers formed a central government in which they held supreme power. This was the beginning of the Old Kingdom. (Kings tend to rule from a central place, which is why the early dynastic period is not considered a kingdom.) Photo courtesy of State Hermitage MuseumAmenemhat III was one of the great rulers of the Middle Kingdom. During his time as pharaoh, the Pyramid of Hawara was built. During the Old Kingdom, pyramid building flourished. Cheops had the six-million-ton Great Pyramid of Giza constructed as his tomb. Under Chephren, a Fourth Dynasty ruler, the Great Sphinx was built. The end of the Old Kingdom was marked by civil wars between pharaohs and nobles. The Middle Kingdom Montuhotep II (2,007-1,956 B.C.E.), an Eleventh dynasty pharaoh, was the last ruler of the Old Kingdom and the first ruler of the Middle Kingdom. He and his successors restored political order. The Middle Kingdom is remembered as a time of flourishing arts, particularly in jewelry making. Egypt became a great trading power during this period and continued massive construction projects. Eventually, the long reign of prosperity gave way to old problems: crop failures, economic woes, dynastic power struggles, and foreign invaders. Amenemhet III (1817-1772 B.C.E.), of the Twelfth Dynasty, was responsible for the construction of two great projects. He completed the building of the giant waterwheels of the Faiyum region that diverted the floodwaters of the Nile. Amenemhet also constructed the Pyramid of Hawara, which became known as the Labyrinth. It contained about 3,000 rooms. Trouble struck when a group of foreigners, the Hyksos, a Semitic-Asiatic group, invaded the Nile Delta region. These advanced warriors used new tools for war: bronze weapons and horse-drawn chariots. They defeated the Egyptians, who fought on foot with copper-and-stone weapons. The New Kingdom Early pharaohs of the New Kingdom evicted the Hyksos. The New Kingdom is remembered as a time of renaissance in artistic creation, but also as the end of dynastic rule. This period was also marred by corrupt priests and tomb-robbing by government officials. Tutankhamun may be the most famous of Egypt's pharaohs because of the discovery of his untouched tomb in 1922. The tombs of more prominent pharaohs had been pillaged, but Tut's resting place and its golden treasures had escaped the hands of looters. A famed pharaoh of the new period was Amenhotep IV, who triggered a religious revolution. Before Amenhotep's rule, Egypt was a polytheistic society that believed in many gods, the most important named Amon. But, Amenhotep believed only in Aton, the sun god. Belief in only one god (monotheism) was a radical notion. To show his devotion to Aton, the pharaoh changed his name to Akenhaton ("he who is loyal to Aton"). Akenhaton moved his capital from Thebes, where Amon was worshipped, to Tell el Amarna. Naturally, the priests who represented the other gods did not like this change one bit. Many Egyptians also did not like the pharaoh discrediting their gods. After the death of Akenhaton, the powerful priests forced the new capital to be moved back to Thebes . Tut-Tut The pharaoh who moved the capital back to Thebes was a boy-king. He ruled for nine years, attempted to pacify the priests, and was responsible for some modest building projects. He began his reign at the age of 10 but died of a head injury at 19. But, his name is famous: Tutankhamun, or more familiarly, King Tut. Tut is mostly remembered because of his beautiful tomb — one of the very few that was not pillaged by grave robbers. Ramses II, or Ramses the Great, was another important ruler during this period. He reigned for 67 years and died in about 1,213 B.C.E. at age 96. His nearly 200 wives and concubines bore 96 sons and 60 daughters. Not only did Ramesses build a great family, he also built two temples at Abu Simbel, a covered hall of giant pillars at Karnak, additions at the Luxor Temple, and the Ramesseum, a compound consisting of two temples and a palace. After Ramses' rule, Egypt fell into steady decline. Today, his 3,000-year-old mummy lies in a display case on the second floor of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Egypt's capital. Over the course of the next nine centuries, the Nubians, the Assyrians, and the Persians bounded into Egypt and ravaged the area. When Pharaoh Nectanebo II retreated to Memphis to avoid death at the hands of oncoming Persian invaders in 343 B.C.E., he became the last Egyptian-born pharaoh, ending over 2,500 years of Egyptian self-rule. Page 26 Egyptian society was structured like a pyramid. At the top were the gods, such as Ra, Osiris, and Isis. Egyptians believed that the gods controlled the universe. Therefore, it was important to keep them happy. They could make the Nile overflow, cause famine, or even bring death. In the social pyramid of ancient Egypt the pharaoh and those associated with divinity were at the top, and servants and slaves made up the bottom. The Egyptians also elevated some human beings to gods. Their leaders, called pharaohs, were believed to be gods in human form. They had absolute power over their subjects. After pharaohs died, huge stone pyramids were built as their tombs. Pharaohs were buried in chambers within the pyramids. Because the people of Egypt believed that their pharaohs were gods, they entrusted their rulers with many responsibilities. Protection was at the top of the list. The pharaoh directed the army in case of a foreign threat or an internal conflict. All laws were enacted at the discretion of the pharaoh. Each farmer paid taxes in the form of grain, which were stored in the pharaoh's warehouses. This grain was used to feed the people in the event of a famine. The Chain of Command Ancient Egyptian royalty, nobility, and clergy enjoyed lives of wealth and comfort while farmers and slaves struggled to subsist. No single person could manage all these duties without assistance. The pharaoh appointed a chief minister called a vizier as a supervisor. The vizier ensured that taxes were collected. Working with the vizier were scribes who kept government records. These high-level employees had mastered a rare skill in ancient Egypt — they could read and write. Right below the pharaoh in status were powerful nobles and priests. Only nobles could hold government posts; in these positions they profited from tributes paid to the pharaoh. Priests were responsible for pleasing the gods. Religion was a central theme in ancient Egyptian culture and each town had its own deity. Initially, these deities were animals; later, they took on human appearances and behaviors. Seated here is Thoth, the god of learning and wisdom, carrying a scepter symbolizing magical power. Nobles enjoyed great status and also grew wealthy from donations to the gods. All Egyptians — from pharaohs to farmers — gave gifts to the gods. Soldier On Soldiers fought in wars or quelled domestic uprisings. During long periods of peace, soldiers also supervised the peasants, farmers, and slaves who were involved in building such structures as pyramids and palaces. Skilled workers such as physicians and craftspersons made up the middle class. Craftspersons made and sold jewelry, pottery, papyrus products, tools, and other useful things. Naturally, there were people needed to buy goods from artisans and traders. These were the merchants and storekeepers who sold these goods to the public. The Bottom of the Heap At the bottom of the social structure were slaves and farmers. Slavery became the fate of those captured as prisoners of war. In addition to being forced to work on building projects, slaves toiled at the discretion of the pharaoh or nobles. Farmers tended the fields, raised animals, kept canals and reservoirs in good order, worked in the stone quarries, and built the royal monuments. Farmers paid taxes that could be as much as 60 percent of their yearly harvest — that's a lot of hay! Social mobility was not impossible. A small number of peasants and farmers moved up the economic ladder. Families saved money to send their sons to village schools to learn trades. These schools were run by priests or by artisans. Boys who learned to read and write could become scribes, then go on to gain employment in the government. It was possible for a boy born on a farm to work his way up into the higher ranks of the government. Bureaucracy proved lucrative.

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