

Government - Part I

Leaders :

Over its long history, Egypt has experienced times of great turmoil and long periods of prosperity. Leaders who successfully united the country, repelled attackers, or conquered neighboring lands stand out as rulers who strengthened Egypt's power. Other leaders are notable for their contributions to Egyptian civilization, from constructing monumental architecture to supporting the arts and culture by establishing schools and libraries.

In predynastic times, the many settlements in Egypt gradually became small tribal kingdoms, which then evolved into two states, one in the north and one in the south. King Narmer, also known as Menes, united the two and brought about a central, consolidated government around 3200 BC. This laid the foundations of the Pharaonic reign in Egypt that was divided into about thirty dynasties.

Old Kingdom rulers completed many astonishing building projects. King Djoser's Step Pyramid represented the first major architectural work in stone. The pharaohs Khufu, Khafre, and Mankare built the Great Pyramids at Giza. King Sneferu sent military expeditions as far as Libya and Nubia.

After the Old Kingdom, leadership declined and Egypt no longer had a central authority. The north-south battle over Egyptian territory resumed until around 2065 BC, when Montuhotep the Second restored order and security to the country. Military campaigns were launched again to Libya, Nubia, and the Sinai deserts. Another important Middle Kingdom ruler was Amenemhat, who extended the kingdom to Syria and Palestine. The Middle Kingdom ended with the invasion of the Hyksos.

Ahmoses the First expelled the Hyksos from Egypt, establishing the New Kingdom. During this period, Egyptian culture flourished and Egypt became a world power. After a period of peace under Queen Hatshepsut, Thutmose the Third expanded the kingdom beyond Nubia and across the Euphrates River. By the reign of Amenophis the Third, Egypt was secure and wealthy enough for him to build the magnificent Temple of Luxor. His son, Amenophis the Fourth, changed his name to Akhenaten and tried to establish the worship of one god, Aten. After his death, the Egyptians reverted to their prior religious practices. Ramesses the First and his successors were warrior kings who reconquered many territories lost under previous rulers, including Palestine, Nubia, the Near East, and Asia Minor. Ramesses the First also constructed enormous monuments and buildings.

In 332 BC Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, putting an end to the Pharaonic reign in Egypt and starting the Greco-Roman era. For the next two-and-a-half centuries, the Ptolemaic dynasty of the Greeks would successfully rule Egypt. Ptolemy the First established Egypt as a great trade and naval power. The last of the Ptolemies, Queen Cleopatra the Seventh, aligned herself with first Caesar and then Anthony, but after her defeat by Octavian Caesar, Egypt became a Roman province.

After the fall of Rome, the Byzantine era began with Emperor

Constantine. The Byzantines ruled Egypt from Constantinople until the Arab conquest of Egypt in AD 642, headed by Amr Ibn Al-As. Egypt became part of an expanding empire under the Umayyads until the Abbasids took control of the Caliphate in 749 BC and relocated the headquarters to Baghdad. In AD 868, Ahmed Ibn Tulun was appointed as ruler of Egypt. He was able to gain Egyptian independence from the Abbasids for 37 years.

The Fatimids separated from the Sunni Caliphate and established their capital in Al Qahira in Egypt in AD 969. They ruled from their imperial city until 1171 when Salah al-Din Al-Ayyubi assumed control. He built the Citadel, repelled the attacks of the Crusaders, and ushered in a golden age for Egypt. He established many institutions, including the madrassa, or school, and the hospital. After the Ayyubid era ended with the rule of Shajar Al-Durr, the only woman to rule during the Islamic era, the Mamluks rose to power. Both Sultan Qala'un and his successor, Mohammed Al-Nasir, were great builders of mosques, fortresses, and other buildings in Cairo. Sultan Qaitbay was another great patron of architecture during the Mamluk era.

Seats of Power:

Throughout Egypt's history, different cities have risen and fallen as the seat of political, cultural, and commercial power. These cities are usually built on the Nile, which gave the rulers control over the movement of ships and goods along the river. After uniting Egypt around 3200 BC, King Menes established Enb-Hej, or the White Wall, now known as Memphis. Located near the tip of the Delta, it became a great religious and administrative center during most of the Old Kingdom. Ptah was the patron god of Memphis. The nearby necropolis at Saqqara was a favourite burial ground for pharaohs. Memphis remained prosperous through the Roman times but declined until the Arab conquest, when Muslims took stone from its ruins to build Cairo.

After a period of political disorder, Montuhotep the First reunited Egypt during the Eleventh Dynasty and moved the political capital south to Thebes, currently known as Luxor. The patron god of Thebes was Amun, "the Hidden One," who formed the Theban triad with Mut and Khonsu. Rulers were buried in the great mortuary complexes in the Valley of the Kings. Thebes declined after being attacked by the Assyrians and Romans.

Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Under the Ptolemies, the capital was transferred to Alexandria shortly afterwards. Alexandria lies at the western extremity of the Nile Delta on the sandy strip of land that separates Lake Mareotis from the Mediterranean Sea. Under the Greeks, Alexandria became the cultural and economic capital of the ancient world. It was famous for the great library and the Museion, or museum. The Serapeum, where the patron god Serapis was worshiped, was also located there. As one of the Mediterranean's busiest ports, it was home to the great lighthouse, the Pharos of Alexandria. The city remained an important port and shipbuilding center through the Muslim era.

After the fragmentation of the Roman empire, and after being ruled by the Byzantine empire, Egypt was conquered by Amr Ibn al-As. Amr Ibn al-As established a new capital, Al-Fustat, at the eastern side of the river near the old Roman fortress of Babylon. Because of its location on the Nile between Upper and Lower Egypt, it became a port for the trade from China, India, Yemen, and Europe and the meeting point for Muslims from West Asia and North Africa. Shipbuilding was established as an important industry by Mohammad Ibn Tughj Al-Ikhshid in AH 324 (AD 936) until the reign of Al-Nasir Mohammad Ibn Qala'un. Ahmed Ibn Tulun in AD 868 established El-Quatae as the new capital, where it remained until AD 969 when the Fatimids took over and founded Al-Qahira, which was an enclosed royal city. Salah al-Din expelled the Fatimids and allowed the public to build in and around the royal city, which became Cairo. He built the Citadel in AD 1176 - 1177 on Cairo's most easily defended hill and expanded the walls to enclose the growing city. Building projects for madrassas, or colleges, and mosques made Cairo a great center for Muslim scholarship.