

Government - Part II

Theocracy

From the beginning of the Pharaonic period, Ancient Egypt was run as a theocracy. A theocracy is a form of government in which the government claims to rule on behalf of a god or deity. A powerful king would promote the belief that he had the support of the gods, so no one would try to remove him and risk the displeasure of the gods.

From this grew the idea of divine kingship, that the king was the divine representative of a god on earth.

There are two theories for how the idea for divine kingship started. One is that a king spread a rumor that he'd had a vision in which the gods had told him he was their representative on earth. Another theory is that when a king returned home after an extended period, he found his wife pregnant. She might have said that a god, the king's father, had impregnated her to continue the divine line of kingship.

When the pharaoh was crowned, it was believed that the spirit of Horus entered into him as a guide. He also received the royal ka, or soul, which made him divine. When he died, the pharaoh's spirit would be merged with Osiris so that he could guide his successor. As a god, the king became a son of Ra, or Amun-Re in later years. Various festivals reinforced the king's divinity, such as the annual Opet festival, which renewed the king's union with his royal ka. The Heb-Sed festival, celebrated after thirty years, was intended to restore the king's vitality and confirm his union with the royal ka.

The symbols of the pharaoh associated him with the gods: the crook was to reward the innocent while the flail was to punish the guilty, the double crown showed his authority over the two lands, and the ureaus, or royal cobra, was the Eye of Ra, who would see all that the pharaoh did. The king was charged with settling legal disputes and leading religious rituals. He held the balance of maat, the rule of order over chaos. As long as he honoured the gods and obeyed their laws, all would be well.

Because of his status as a god, the pharaoh had a cult both during his life and after his death. This became more prominent during the New Kingdom. The king's cult rituals were very similar to other daily temple rituals. Statues were built to receive offerings, including statues of the king making offerings to his deified self. Royal cults were used to serve political aims as well. During a co-regency, when the successor was crowned before the death of the prior king, the elder ruler was often projected into a divine status. By the New Kingdom, the cult of the king began to focus on his divine birth, in that the king was not created from the seed of his father, but by Amun himself. Rulers such as Hatshepsut used this to legitimize their claim to the throne.

In the Greco-Roman era, the Ptolemies adapted the ancient Egyptian system of theocracy to support their right to rule. By the time of Ptolemy the Second, the king and queen claimed themselves to be gods. The notion of the sacred family evolved, in which the lineage of the Ptolemies was said to extend to Alexander the Great with Zeus as the divine ancestor. Ptolemaic rulers also had offering cults much as the ancient Egyptian rulers before them. The establishment of the brother-sister marriage springs from this Hellenistic form of divine

kingship, set by the precedent of the marriage between Zeus and his sister Hera. It also had its practical purposes, to keep the wealth within the family and to prevent rivals from gaining power through marriage.

Military

Egypt was considered the most peaceful country in the ancient world. Its natural boundaries, the First Cataract on the Nile at Aswan, the deserts east and west of the Nile Valley, and the Mediterranean coast to the north, provided plenty of protection from outsiders, and Egyptians themselves were not a society of invaders or conquerors.

At that time, Egypt had a loosely organized, part-time army and crude, inferior weapons. A small core of regular soldiers were scattered throughout the country to preserve law and order and to protect public buildings, palaces, and cemeteries. The government used mandatory recruitment of the youth and peasants in times of crises.

However, war was not to be avoided. The image of a king slaughtering foreigners was constantly repeated throughout ancient history. Many wooden models were found portraying marching soldiers. Egyptians referred to their enemies as the "Nine Bows." The figure "nine" represented three times three, which the ancient Egyptians considered the "Plurality of Pluralities," symbolizing all possible enemies.

Nations such as the Hittites that held valuable resources the Egyptians wanted were one type of enemy. Except for the Nubians, they were usually not a threat to Egypt as invaders. Other enemies were a direct threat to Egypt as an invading force and possessed little that Egypt wished to have. These enemies included the Libyans, Persians, and the Mediterranean Sea Peoples.

After the Middle Kingdom, Egypt was ruled by a dynasty of Asiatic kings, known as the Hyksos. They came to Egypt with horses, chariots, and copper weapons, which the Egyptians would later adapt for their own armies. The Hyksos were eventually expelled, but this interlude of foreign rule resulted in a new, aggressive professional army with improved weaponry, such as the khepesh, a sickle sword similar to Asiatic curved swords. Egypt became a major military power and the New Kingdom characterized an aggressive nation rather than the defensive one it had been previously.

The army was made up of the infantry and chariotry divisions, commanded by either the king or one of the princes. These divisions consisted of approximately 5,000 soldiers and each division was named after an Egyptian god. Some men chose the army as their profession due to the privileges it provided. They were given untaxed plots of land and daily provisions of fine foods. There was a general code of conduct that soldiers were proud to adhere to, like returning safely to the homeland with the army, no quarrelling among soldiers, obeying orders, and not attacking civilians or their properties.

During the New Kingdom, King Tutmosis the Third and King Ramesses the Second stand out as great military leaders. The Battle of Kadesh is one of the earliest battles that can be reliably reconstructed in detail from various records on both sides of the conflict. It was fought between Ramesses the Second and the Hittites over control of Syrian territory. After both sides realized no victory was near, the first peace treaty in the world was signed.

At the beginning of the Ptolemaic reign in Egypt, the Ptolemies depended on Macedonians and Greeks to form their army, because most wars during that era were fought on water. Egyptians had little experience in this and so their participation was limited. However, after an expansion in military operations, especially due to frequent wars with Syria, King Ptolemy the Fourth had to recruit about 20,000 Egyptians. Thanks to them, the Ptolemies were able to achieve victory over the Saluki invasion in a decisive battle at Rafah in AD 217. Afterward, the Egyptians' position improved and their power increased within the Ptolemaic Army.

In the Roman era, the majority of the army were Romans, especially during the first 150 years of the Roman reign in Egypt. Afterward, the number of local soldiers increased until they became the majority in the army of Byzantine Egypt. Military service in the Roman era lasted for 25 years and soldiers were not allowed to get married during their service.

During the Islamic reign of Egypt, Arabs prohibited the Egyptians from serving in the military, except for subsidiary work. When the Arabs found that Egyptian soldiers had good experience on the sea, they used them to establish Islamic marine power in the Mediterranean Sea. The Arabs also benefited from the experience of the Egyptians in shipbuilding. Egypt became a marine base and there were a number of shipbuilding arsenals in Al-Roda, Alexandria, and Damietta.