

# Chapter 3

## The Ancient Egyptian Civilization

### Objectives

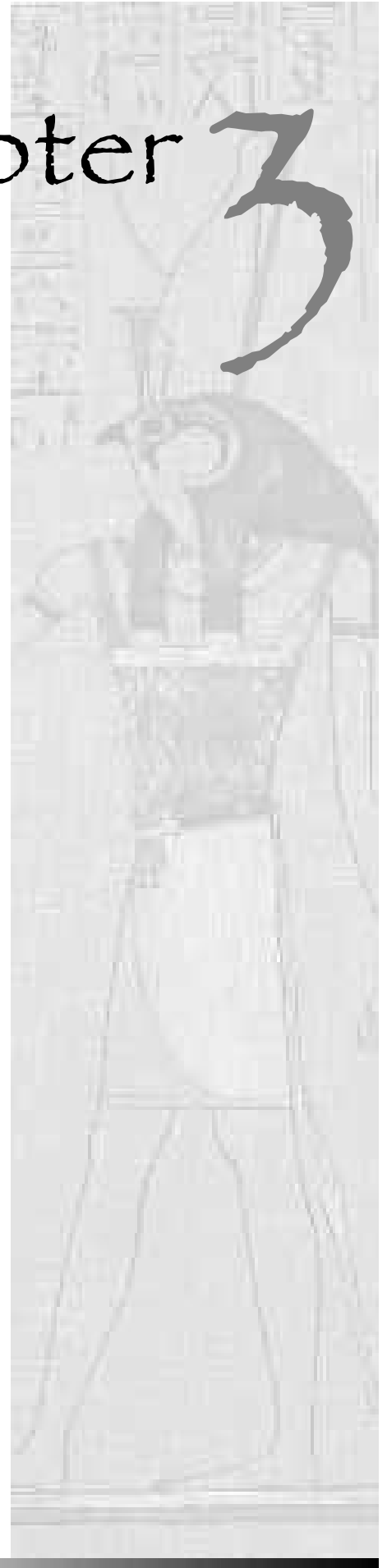
To put the ancient Egyptian civilization into historical perspective and to look at why it is considered a great civilization.

### Mystery

Why did the ancient Egyptian civilization last so much longer than all the other civilizations that came after it?

### Discussion and Research Projects

1. a) When did the pharaohs rule Egypt?  
b) Make a list of the pharaonic periods and the corresponding dates. The dates will vary from one source to another. Compare this on a time line with other ancient civilizations you have studied.
2. The ancient Egyptian civilization has been acclaimed as one of the greatest of the ancient world. Do you agree? Why? Use the criteria for evaluating ancient civilizations to see how Egypt rates (see **Activity Sheet 5**).
3. How did the ancient Egyptians explain the origins of their first pharaoh?
4. Why are so many vestiges of the ancient Egyptian civilization visible today?
5. Why did the ancient Egyptian civilization fall into decline?
6. Compare the reasons for the decline of the ancient Egyptian civilization with those for other civilizations you have studied.
7. What two nations ruled Egypt in the last period of dynastic rule?



8. History has shown that all great civilization go through a cycle of rise and fall. What factors may pose a threat to the survival of contemporary civilizations?

### **Creative Projects**

1. Use **Activity Sheet 5** to learn about the characteristics that distinguish ancient Egypt as a great civilization. Some of the criteria used to evaluate a civilization are: a unified world view or a religion, a government, a communication system, trade and defence capabilities, architectural achievements, proliferation of the arts, and a diversified workforce.
2. Use **Activity Sheet 6** to learn how to read the symbols on Narmer's palette. King Narmer united Upper and Lower Egypt in 3000 B.C. (late pre-dynastic period). Ask your students why Narmer had such a palette made. Consider the importance of creating visual images in a society that was largely illiterate.

## FACT SHEET: The Ancient Egyptian Civilization

### Egyptian Time Line

The pharaohs ruled ancient Egypt for almost 3,000 years. The first dynasty started in 3000 B.C. with the reign of King Narmer. In 332 B.C., Alexander the Great drove out the hated Persians to become the new ruler of the land. This brought the pharaonic era to an end.

In the fourth century B.C., a high priest and scribe of the sacred shrines of Egypt named Manetho compiled the first comprehensive list of the pharaohs. He grouped their reigns into dynastic divisions that to a large degree are still considered accurate today.

### Mythical Beginnings

Ancient cultures trace their origins to a mythical time when the earth was formed and humans were born. Creation stories — accounts of that mythical time — were passed down through the ages and recorded in paintings and in writing.

In ancient Egypt, these accounts were written in hieroglyphs on the walls of pyramids, tombs and temples, and on wooden tablets and sheets of papyrus. These sacred writings provide an indication of how the Egyptians explained the origins of their culture.

The texts make reference to the very early history of Egypt, to a time when the land was ruled by god-kings. The mythical god Horus was believed to be the first god-king to rule Upper and Lower Egypt. The pharaohs were considered the living Horus, and when they died, they became Osiris, Lord of the Dead. As intermediaries between the human world and the world of the gods, the pharaohs brought wisdom and justice to their people, and taught them the secrets of life and death.

### The Decline of Ancient Egypt

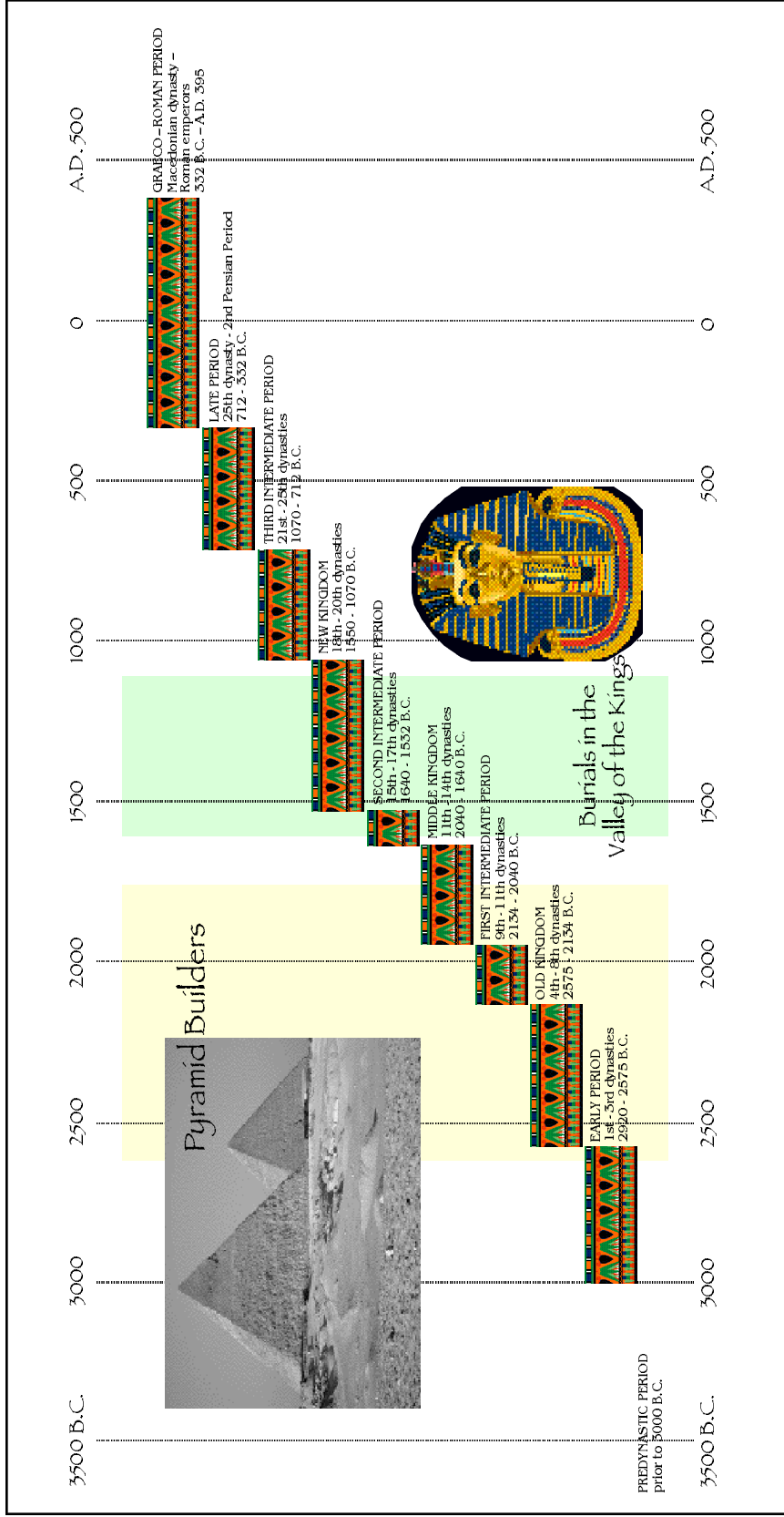
Although Egypt was sometimes ruled by foreign princes during the pharaonic period, it continued to maintain its independence. Over the centuries, the power of the pharaohs increased and decreased numerous times before Egypt came under foreign rule. Around 1000 B.C., Egypt was virtually bankrupt and its strength began to decline.<sup>5</sup>



Horus wearing the Double Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt  
Photo: Harry Foster (CMC S98 3562)

## Chronology of the Pharaonic Periods<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that the dates assigned to the pharaonic periods vary slightly from one Egyptologist to another.



Graphics: Danielle Dupont



A pharaoh making an offering to an Apis bull  
CMC ECD98-014 #15

The Persians and the Macedonian Greeks were the first foreign powers to rule the country. In 350 B.C., a new Persian ruler, Artaxerxes III, attempted to invade the country but failed. Seven years later, Egypt did fall to the Persians, during the reign of Nectanebo II, the last Egyptian pharaoh. According to Greek accounts, the Persians were cruel masters, robbing temples, killing sacred animals and burdening the people with taxes.

The Macedonian Greek emperor Alexander the Great waged a campaign to destroy the Persian empire. When he entered Egypt in 332 B.C., he was hailed as a divine being and saviour. He hastened to Memphis, performed a sacrificial ceremony to the Apis Bull and was accepted as the new pharaoh. The founding of the city of Alexandria, on the Mediterranean coast, marked the beginning of the end for ancient Egypt.

Egypt changed immensely under Greek rule, although to a large degree the population maintained its way of life, and continued to write in its own language and to observe its traditional customs. Greek and demotic (a form of hieroglyphs) were both used in the Late Period, but in the third century A.D., hieroglyphic writing began to be replaced by Coptic, a form of Greek writing. As time passed, fewer and fewer priests could read hieroglyphs, and gradually the Egyptian language died out. Following the deaths of Mark Anthony and Cleopatra VII in 30 B.C., Egypt became part of the Roman Empire. When the Empire was divided in A.D. 395, Egypt was controlled from Byzantium until the Arab conquest in A.D. 641.