

The pharaohs of ancient egypt history essay



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"A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within." W. Durant. Writer, Historian and Philosopher. (Will Durant, 2010)

To fully understand the influence the Kings or the Pharaohs of Egypt had on its success and failure one must study the civilization of Ancient Egypt. Stretching back more than 4000 years, it was one of the largest and most successful empires in history. (Polletta) . Ancient Egypt was an oasis in the desert of northeastern Africa, stretching from the modern day Aswan to the fertile plains of the Nile river valley. The civilization that thrived in this region was had its genesis because of drought forcing nomadic hunter gatherers towards the Nile's floodplains (Polletta). The country's chief wealth came from these fertile floodplains that the people were able to adapt to their benefit (Kuiper, 2010). The predictable flooding and controlled irrigation of the valley produced surplus crops and pasture for grazing. This utopia then fuelled social development and culture through pottery, artistry and masonry (Ancient Egypt, 2010). Being the most advanced civilization between 3150 BC and 30 BC Ancient Egypt was at the forefront of mathematics and sciences. They had developed an independent writing system and took up implausibly multifaceted construction projects such as the great pyramids. Their agricultural techniques were far beyond their time along with their knowledge of minerals and quarrying (Polletta).

As in cases with most civilizations this success eventually ceased. The empire began to decline and a series of political and natural disasters brought this mighty empire to its knees. I propose that the main reason for this downfall is the Pharaohs who with their god like stature in society misled

the civilization into a false sense of security. Coupled with the threat of drought because of the failure of the Nile River to flood the downfall of the empire was inevitable.

3. The Pharaohs

The title of “ Pharaoh” actually comes from the Greek language and its use in the Old Testament. It originates in the Egyptian Per-aa, meaning “ Great House,” a designation of the palace, first used as a label for the king around 1450 BC, and became common usage some centuries later. The usual word for the king of ancient Egypt at the time was nesu , but a whole range of titles were applicable to any full statement of a king’s names (Dunn). Some of the names include ‘ Lord of the two lands’ and ‘ Priest of every temple’ (Pharoah, 2010)

Below the Pharaoh were the layers of educated bureaucracy which consisted of nobles, priests and civil servants. Under them were the great masses of common people, usually living very poor, agriculturally based lives. The man or men just under the king were Viziers, a position that was roughly similar to the modern Prime Minister (Dunn). The king was the “ figure upon whom the whole administrative structure of the state rested. These god-kings usually commanded tremendous resources...(and were) the head of the civil administration, the supreme warlord and the chief priest of every god in the kingdom.” (Dunn)(par 7).

The power that a pharaoh commanded in ancient Egypt and the resources he controlled seems staggering. Excellent paradigms of the power are the Great Pyramids, the wealth of gold and the grand temples. They commanded

resources that many modern day states would be hard pressed to outdo, and did so at a time when much of the remainder of the ancient world were struggling for their basic survival.

4. Divinity

The Pharaoh is viewed as a god king who exists as an incarnation of Horus, a falcon god, and the son of Osiris, who himself was a divine king. (Dunn)

As is shown in a variety of primitive civilizations, religious ceremonies are important for unity and a long lasting empire. Countries may be unified under one ruler with one set of laws and a single legal and taxation system but people would only be unified by a single religion. The various festivals, ceremonies and communal acts of worship were what really brought people together (Humphries). Ken Humphries states that “ As kingdoms grew each king had to be as great as the king of his neighboring state otherwise his followers would defect to the superior king and oust the mortal.” It is obvious that no one would want to be ruled by an lesser king and the idea of divine kingship was thus developed. Priests aided this by supporting the King as they didn’t want to get blamed for anything that went wrong. The divine king then could not be deposed unless he lost the favor of the gods in which. As the king and of religious leader the Pharaoh led the most important religious rites and services which helped reinforce his position (Humphries).”

Another aspect of the Pharaohs divinity was their ascension to heaven after death. The Egyptians took great care to bury their dead according to convention and supplied the grave with things that the departed would need for a pleasant life after death. The pharaoh and some nobles had their bodies

preserved in a process of mummification and the tombs were decorated with paintings while food was provided at burial and after. In the beginning “ only pharaohs were thought to achieve eternal life, however, nobles were eventually included, and finally all Egyptians could hope for immortality (Kreis, 2006).” This was one of the winning factors the Pharaohs had going for them because at that time the people were most afraid of death and by promising them immortality, unity and submission could be easily achieved.

5. Timeline of the Pharaohs

The first real king of Egypt, ruling over the unified land, was Menes, who ruled Egypt around 3100 BC, but there is little archaeological proof for this name. Most scholars today believe that he may have been a king named Narmer, or more likely, Aha, two figures that are better attested in the archaeological records (Dunn). The major events of Egypt’s history during the time of pharaoh are listed below.

2700 B. C - First Pyramids Build

2100 B. C - Mentuhotep II gained control of entire country

(2920 - 2770 BC) - During this time the capital at Memphis was founded. Papyrus was invented. Writing was used by the government.

(2420 - 2258 BC) - Pepi I and Pepi II rule - government weakens

2160 BC - Capitol moves from Memphis to Herakleopolis in northern Middle Egypt - Upper Egypt controlled by Theban rulers.

(2150 - 2135 BC) - The political structure of the Old Kingdom collapsed.

There was famine, civil disorder, and a high death rate.

(2135 - 1986 BC) - Egypt split into the north, ruled from Herakleopolis, and the south, ruled from Thebes.

(2074-1937 BC) - Egypt was unified once again under the rule of Metuhotep.

(1900 - 1400 BC) - War (both civil and foreign)

(1336 - 1327 BC) - Reign of Tutankhamen

(1070-945 BC) - The kings weakened, and Egypt was no longer a world power. Civil war and foreign invaders tore Egypt apart.

(Ancient Egyptian Timeline)

6. Fall of the pharaohs

The well-developed central administration that was setup during the time of the old kingdom began to crumble during the time of the Pharaoh Pepi I and II. The main reason behind this was the diminishing economic power that the state possessed because of its feudal practice of granting land to the scribes and officials. In addition to this the Pharaohs also granted the land and other resources to cults and local temples to ensure that these institutions possess the necessary resources to worship the pharaoh after death. The belief that the Pharaoh being a god king and was thus able to control the flooding of the Nile was the next stepping stone to complete failure. Recent evidence shows the Nile began to dry up because of climate change and the people who had put their trust in the Pharaoh were not able to sustain themselves (Polletta).

The state could not afford a centralized administration because of these factors and the power of the pharaoh eventually diminished. Regional governors began to challenge the pharaoh and started establishing their own states. Once in control of their own resources these provincial nomarchs began to compete with each other for territory and political power. This went on until the time of Metuhotep who after a lengthy civil war united the country again. This was followed by a reign of prosperity and growth but the pharaoh's power was diminished. This was followed by periods of war and peace with neighboring countries which left its mark on the empire. With the diminishing power of the pharaohs and the incompetence among the new generation Egypt was torn apart by foreign invaders (Ancient Egypt, 2010).

7. Conclusion

One of the greatest strengths of the ancient Egypt civilization was the Pharaoh because of his or her ability to unite the country into a single nation. On the other hand this was also their greatest weakness.

The delusional narcissistic notions of the pharaohs eroded the economy over time. By conjuring ideas of god like grandeur these self-righteous monarchs began to waste precious resources on vain projects such as the pyramids. In addition to this by perpetrating to be the god king who could control the flooding of the Nile these pharaohs destroyed the empire as necessary precautions for drought were not taken. I propose that the reason the Egyptian civilization fell is because they believed too much in the power of a single man and didn't invest enough time in researching options in case of drought. I base this argument from the data discussed in Gabriella Polletta's Movie, why ancient Egypt fell, where Dr Faker Hassan explains how the Pepi I

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and II signed pacts with the people to maintain the flooding of the Nile on which their livelihood depended. By keeping the people in a state of confidence no precautionary measures were taken to survive a drought. This was the beginning of the downfall.

Last but not the least as an addition seal to the fall of Egyptian civilization the Pharaoh was able to influence the people's actions indefinitely. Though this would warrant un-questioned submission it presented problems in the face of incompetency. The last few Pharaohs guaranteed the end of the empire because of their obsession with harems and apathy towards state affairs. Eventually the government was run by priests who were only after their own benefit thus leading to a complete downfall after a period of chaos (Rawlinson, 2008).