History

pharaoh

It was the name of the rulers of Egypt, derived from the word *pero* or *pera'a*, which designated the royal residence. The term became associated with the ruler and was eventually used in cartouches and royal decrees. The roles of these rulers, along with their specific titles, evolved slowly after the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt ca. 3000 BCE. Dynasties emerged after that unification, and a state cult was developed to define the powers of such pharaohs. In time the ruler was described in the tomb of Rekhmiré, serving Tuthmosis III (r. 1479–1425 BCE) in the following terms: "He is a god by whose dealings one lives, the father and mother of all men, alone, by himself without an equal."

The pharaohs were officially titled *neter-nefer*, which gave them semidivine status. *Neter* meant god and *nefer* good and beautiful, an adjective that modified the godlike qualities and limited the pharaonic role and nature. The royal cults proclaimed this elevated status, beginning in the earliest dynastic periods, by announcing that the pharaohs were "the good god," the incarnation of Horus, the son of Ré. On earth they manifested the divine, and in death they would become Osiris. Through their association with these deities, the pharaohs assumed specific roles connected to the living, to the dead, and to natural processes. While on the throne, they were expected to serve as the supreme human, the heroic warrior, the champion of all rights, the dispenser of equal justice, and the defender of *Ma'at* and the nation.

Egypt belonged to each pharaoh, and the nation's ideals and destiny were physically present in his person. His enemies, therefore, were the enemies of the gods themselves and all things good in nature and in the divine order. This concept developed slowly, of course, and pharaohs came to the throne declaring that they were mandated by the gods "to restore *ma'at*," no matter how illustrious their immediate predecessor had been. The semidivine nature of the pharaoh did not have a negative effect on the levels of service rendered by nobles or commoners, however. His role, stressed in the educational processes at all levels, inspired a remarkable devotion among civil servants, and each pharaoh attracted competent and faithful officials. The temple rituals added to the allure of the pharaoh and developed another contingent of loyal servants for the reign.

The rulers of Egypt were normally the sons and heirs of their immediate predecessors, either by "the Great Wife," the chief consort, or by a lesser-ranked wife. Some, including Tuthmosis III (r. 1479–1425 BCE) of the Eighteenth Dynasty, were the offspring of the pharaoh and harem women. In the early dynasties the rulers married female aristocrats to establish connections to the local nobility of the Delta or Memphis, the capital. In subsequent periods many married their sisters or half sisters, if available, and some, including Akhenaten, took their own daughters as consorts. In the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BCE) the rulers did not hesitate to name commoners as the Great Wife, and several married foreign princesses.

The rulers of the Early Dynastic Period (2920–2575 BCE) were monarchs who were intent upon ruling a united land, although the actual process of unification was not completed until 2649 BCE. There is evidence that these early kings were motivated by certain ideals concerning their responsibilities to the people, ideals that were institutionalized in later eras. Like the gods who created the universe out of chaos, the pharaoh was responsible for the orderly conduct of human affairs. Upon ascending the throne, later pharaohs of Egypt claimed that they were restoring the spirit of *ma'at* in the land, cosmic order and harmony, the divine will.

Warfare was an essential aspect of the pharaoh's role from the beginning. The rulers of the Predynastic Periods, later deified as the Souls of Pe and Souls of Nekhen, had fought to establish unity, and the first dynastic rulers had to defend borders, put down rebellions, and organize the exploitation of natural resources. A strong government was in place by the dynastic period, the nation being divided into provincial territories called nomes. Royal authority was imposed by an army of officials, who were responsible for the affairs of both Upper and Lower Egypt. The law was thus the expression of the ruler's will, and all matters, both religious and secular, were dependent upon his assent. The entire administration of Egypt, in fact, was but an extension of the ruler's power.

By the Third Dynasty, Djoser (r. 2630–2611 BCE) could command sufficient resources to construct his vast mortuary complex, a monumental symbol of the land's prosperity and centralization. The Step Pyramid, erected for him by Imhotep, the vizier of the reign, announced the powers of Djoser and reinforced the divine status of the rulers. Other Old Kingdom (2575–2134 BCE) pharaohs continued to manifest their power with similar structures, culminating in the great pyramids at Giza.
In the First Intermediate Period (2134–2040 BCE) the role of the pharaoh was eclipsed by the dissolution of central authority. Toward the end of the Old Kingdom certain powers were delegated to the nome aristocracy, and the custom of appointing only royal family members to high office was abandoned. The Seventh and Eighth Dynasties attempted to reinstate the royal cult, but these rulers could not stave off the collapse of those royal lines. In the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties, the Khety of Herakleopolis assumed the role of pharaoh and began to work toward the reunification of Egypt, using the various nome armies as allies. The rise of the Inyotefs of Thebes, however, during the Eleventh Dynasty, brought an end to the Khety's designs. Montuhotep II (r. 2061–2010 BCE) captured Herakleopolis and reunited Upper and Lower Egypt.

The Middle Kingdom (2040–1640 BCE) emerged from Montuhotep II's victory over the northern rulers, and Egypt was again united under a central authority. When the Middle Kingdom collapsed in 1640 BCE, Egypt faced another period of turmoil and division. The Thirteenth through Sixteenth Dynasties vied for land and power, and the Hyksos dominated the eastern Delta and then much of Lower Egypt. It is interesting that these Asiatic rulers, especially those among them called "the Great Hyksos," assumed the royal traditions of Egypt and embraced all of the titles and customs of their predecessors.

In Thebes, however, another royal line, the Seventeenth Dynasty, slowly amassed resources and forces and began the campaigns to expel the Hyksos. Kamose, the last king of this line, died in battle, and the assault on Avaris, the Hyksos capital, was completed by 'Ahmose, who founded the New Kingdom (1550–1070 BCE). This was the age of the Tuthmossids, followed by the Ramessids, Egypt's imperial period. Military activities characterized the period, and many of the kings were noted warriors. The prestige of the king was greatly enhanced as a result, and Amenhotep III and Ramesses II had themselves deified. The New Kingdom, as did other dynastic eras in Egypt, drew to a close when the pharaohs were no longer able to assert their authority, and thereby galvanize the nation. The New Kingdom collapsed in 1070 BCE.

During the Third Intermediate Period (1070–712 BCE), the role of the pharaoh was fractured, as competing crowned rulers or self-styled leaders issued their decrees from the Delta and Thebes. The rise of the Libyans in the Twenty-second Dynasty (945–712 BCE) aided Egypt by providing military defenses and a cultural renaissance, but Shoshenq I (r. 945–924 BCE) and his successors were clearly recognized as foreigners, and the dynasty was unable to approach the spiritual elements necessary for the revival of the true pharaoh of the past. This was evident to the Nubians (modern Sudanese), who watched a succession of city-states, petty rulers, and chaos in Egypt and entered the land to restore the periods of spiritual power and majesty. The Persians, entering the Nile Valley in 525 BCE, came with a sense of disdain concerning the cultic practices of Egypt and the various rulers competing for power.

Alexander III the Great, arriving in Egypt in 332 BCE, was one of the few occupying foreigners who appeared to embody the old ideals of the pharaohs, but his successors, the Ptolemies (304–30 BCE), could not immerse themselves into the true spiritual concepts involved. They ruled only from Alexandria without impacting on the distant nomes. With the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE, the pharaohs became faded monuments of the past.

Further Information


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