There were few changes in the social organization and system of government over a period of 3,000 years. This orderly arrangement was only punctuated by a possible revolution of some uncertain kind at the end of the Old Kingdom, followed by temporary collapse and disintegration, and by intermittent times of civil war (during the First, Second, and Third Intermediate Periods), when local princlings challenged central authority and established their own power bases. The system was supported and preserved, however, by patterns of marriage and inheritance: People tended to marry within their own social groups, and offices and trades were passed down from father to son. Such stable and centralized government set the framework in which it was possible to construct great monuments and establish an empire; it also ensured that the people were fed. During the periods of collapse and disintegration, there were, nevertheless, civil wars, famine, disorder, lawlessness, and even foreign infiltration and invasion.

The king was central to the government and to religion. He was regarded as half-divine. From the New Kingdom, the term pharaoh was adopted as the title for the king (derived from the Egyptian per-wer, meaning the "great house" [the royal palace]). The king acceded to the throne and received the divine right to rule at his coronation when he became the earthly incarnation of the god Horus. It was believed that each new ruler revitalized the universe and reestablished the original creation. The king ruled Egypt subject to Ma'at, the goddess who symbolized the equilibrium of the universe. Everything emanated from the king, and he theoretically owned all the land, people, and possessions. His individual resurrection after death and continuation as a god in the next world was of paramount importance not just for himself but for the survival of Egypt. To this end all the funerary beliefs and customs were initially designed and developed for the king's use. However, even his seemingly unlimited powers were kept in check because he had to observe precedent and obey the principles of ma'at. Although regarded as part-divine, his subjects did not give each king their blind acceptance and approval but judged him according to his deeds.

From prehistoric times the country had been divided into administrative districts (for which modern historians use the Greek term nomes). The nomes had grown out of those areas originally controlled by the separate tribes, and they persisted into the historic period, each being placed under a district governor (nomarch) who was appointed by the king. Toward the end of the Old Kingdom these became hereditary posts, and subsequently the nomarchs became virtually independent rulers. They were only finally subdued by the king in the Middle Kingdom, and the nomes were redefined in the New Kingdom as a larger number of smaller areas, each strictly controlled by central government. Despite the changes they underwent, the nomes remained the basic administrative unit of Egypt.

Insufficient evidence exists to reconstruct a clear picture of how the economy was organized and how it functioned. In general the land owned by the king was administered by royal officials or presented as a perpetual gift to the temples. Some land was also managed for the king by officials according to a life tenure system: They looked after the estate and in return received revenues from it. Since the Old Kingdom, wealthy individuals had owned some land privately, but the total amount of this property and the number of persons whom they employed were small compared with the possessions of the state or the temples. Other tasks which were necessary to enable the state to run efficiently, such as working the land, brickmaking, and quarrying, were carried out by the peasants who were all liable to corvée duty.

There were sufficient foodstuffs to support the country's relatively small population and also a surplus that was used to trade with other countries. Egypt's exports included paper (papyrus), cereals, textiles, and dried fish; gold and luxury manufactured goods were also traded for the commodities the country lacked: sufficient wood for building, copper, silver, and spices. In addition to trade the Egyptians used diplomacy, conquest, and colonization to acquire these requisites.

Warfare and subsidies of gold were used in Egypt's relations with Asia, whereas colonization and direct control were employed in Nubia. When Egypt had established its empire in Asia, the subordinate city-states there were governed through a system of local rulers who gave allegiance to the Egyptian king. To ensure their continuing loyalty their children were removed to the Egyptian court for education; this also allowed the Egyptians to instill their own ideas and values in the next generation of vassal princes.

Within Egypt the economic system revolved around the payment of wages in kind (usually in food such as corn, barley, fish, and
so forth) to various groups of employees, such as scribes, priests, farmworkers, and artisans. The three major employers—the state, temples, and nobles—paid their employees from the rents and dues they received themselves. Revenue and payments depended on a fairly rapid redistribution system of the food that was grown and collected annually.

Because an essential feature of the organization of the temples and tombs was their continuing commitment to offer food regularly to the gods and the dead, they were closely involved with the general economic policy of the state. Indeed, much of the country's labor and production, which were centered around food, building materials, and other commodities, were directed toward meeting the needs of the gods and the dead.