Chapter 10: Pharaonic State and Old Kingdom Egypt

# Chapter Summary [Copied from Olszewski 2019, Chapter 10]

* In the early Holocene, climatic conditions were wetter and there were areas of seasonal standing water (playas) in some parts of the Sahara Desert. These attracted Neolithic period groups. They hunted wild animals and used wild plant foods and eventually had domesticated animals and plant foods.
* Long-distance trade networks were a feature of the Neolithic period, as were ritual sites. Grave goods buried with people in cemeteries show that pastoralism could be a successful way of life.
* During the Predynastic period, agriculture on the floodplain of the Nile River became increasingly important. There was a shift over time from building pithouses to constructing dwellings of mudbrick. Some towns were positioned to take advantage of trade routes, especially to the Middle East, and there is evidence for increasing social differences between people.
* Elite rulers known as pharaohs emerged during the Pharaonic State. Lavish burials associated with these individuals are found in Upper Egypt. These had a wealth of grave goods, including the first known hieroglyphic writing, and also in some cases “solar boats” and sacrificed humans.
* The pharaohs were considered divine and were associated with various Egyptian gods and goddesses. Many of them ruled both Upper and Lower Egypt and were depicted wearing the two distinctive crowns of these regions.
* Old Kingdom Egypt is well known for the construction of various pyramids, including the stepped pyramid at Saqqara, the “Bent” pyramid at Dahshur, and the pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure at Giza. Although pyramid building continued into later periods, it was on a much smaller scale.
* Egyptian hieroglyphic writing is an important source for understanding their religion and rituals. These included techniques thought to be useful in mummifying the bodies of elites so that they could travel into the afterlife. Written sources also describe the pantheon of gods and goddesses and their stories.
* Egypt under the Old Kingdom pharaohs was incredible wealthy, as can be seen in the massive constructions of pyramids, palaces, and towns. It required a complex bureaucracy to collect taxes in the form of agricultural surpluses, manage work forces and armies, and oversee regional, local, and town governments.
* The pharaohs fought wars to gain lands but also to control lucrative trade routes and to use captives as slaves in agricultural pursuits.
* Ancient Egypt as a complex political entity had a long history/prehistory. After the Old Kingdom, there were several periods of time when parts of Egypt were ruled by outsiders. However, some Egyptian pharaohs were able to reunite the country on several occasions, such as the establishment of the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom.
* The Middle Kingdom is known for its variety of literary works, as well as for being a period of incredible prosperity.
* The New Kingdom is familiar to many people because this is when Pharaoh Tutankhamun briefly ruled. He was the son of Pharaoh Akhenaten, who attempted to change the religion of Egypt to be the worship of just one god (the Aten or sun disk). Another famous New Kingdom ruler was Pharaoh Ramesses II.
* Egypt was eventually conquered by the Greek Empire and ruled by the Ptolomies. The last Ptolomaic pharaoh was Cleopatra VII, whose death in 30 BC led to Egypt falling under the rule of the Roman Empire.

# Key Terms

**Abydos**: an important settlement and cemetery complex in Upper Egypt. Royal cemeteries here contain tombs thought to be those of some of the last pharaohs of the Protodynastic period, as well as of the Pharaonic State, and Old and Middle Kingdom periods. The cult of the Egyptian god Osiris was particularly important here.

**Buto**: a site in the delta region of northern Egypt with Predynastic period and later occupations. Its position at the interface of the Nile River with the delta likely was strategic for trade and exchange not only within Egypt but also with the Middle East.

**Djoser**: a pharaoh of Egypt’s 3rd Dynasty, he is well known because of his stepped pyramid at Saqqara. This was the first type of pyramid built in Egypt.

**Gebel Ramlah**: a Late Neolithic settlement site in the desert Nabta Playa region with an associated cemetery containing individuals buried with abundant grave goods. These people were pastoralists and appear to have played important social roles in their groups.

**Giza**: the necropolis of the 4th Dynasty pharaohs on the west bank of the Nile River not far from the ancient capital at Memphis, it contains the three well-known large pyramids, as well as smaller pyramids for various queens and other important individuals and solar boat burials.

**Hemamieh**: a Predynastic settlement and cemetery in Upper Egypt that has an early (Badarian) occupation that shares many similarities in artifacts and burials with Neolithic groups of the desert playas.

**Khufu**: the Egyptian name for the 4th Dynasty pharaoh who built the largest pyramid at Giza; he is also known by the Greek name of Cheops.

**Memphis**: an important city in Lower Egypt that became the capital during the Pharaonic State period; the central administration was located in this city.

**Nabta Playa**: a desert area of southern Egypt where numerous sites of the Neolithic period occur in the context of Holocene playas (seasonal, shallow lakes). These sites produced evidence of locally domesticated cattle that were brought to these desert wet spots by groups practicing pastoralism.

**Narmer**: the last pharaoh of Dynasty 0, he is sometimes called the Scorpion King, and usually is credited with unifying Egypt around 3100 B.C. Narmer’s Palette, an engraved stone, shows the pharaoah wearing the crown of Upper Egypt on one side and the crown of Lower Egypt on the other.

**Saqqara**: a necropolis on the west side of the Nile River in Egypt, it was the site of the stepped pyramid complex of the 3rd Dynasty pharaoh, Djoser.