Ancient Civilizations
Mr. Hanover
Lecture Notes: Early Egypt

Few ancient civilizations can compete with Egypt in sheer impact on the modern consciousness. While few people know anything about ancient Mesopotamia, except that there were cities there, everyone knows a great deal of miscellaneous stuff about Egypt.

Reasons:
- Ancient Egyptians had easy access to stone, and used it to build large and lasting monuments.
- Egypt has never lacked for tourists, and so the memory of the Egyptians' engineering accomplishments has been constantly renewed, year by year, century by century.
- Over the past two centuries, scholars have made accessible many skillfully rendered pictures of life in Egypt and in the afterworld as visualized by Egyptians.
- King Tut's amazing tomb (discovered and heavily publicized in the 1920s and since).
- Even to scholars, Egypt is almost synonymous with antiquity, simply because, in contrast to all other places known to historians, the country's culture was stable for thousands of years, from the earliest numbered dynasty, around 2900 B.C. right up to the time of Diocletian in the Later Roman Empire.

The uniqueness of Egyptian culture is closely connected to the uniqueness of its geography. We must first banish from our mind the modern legal boundaries that turn the country into a huge square in northeastern Africa, plus the Sinai peninsula. Egypt in historic times has been characterized by a great contrast between a fertile river valley and a bleak desert. The desert is not quite uninhabited, but most of it is so dry that even herdsmen cannot live there in any numbers. This means that dense human settlement is restricted to four different areas. The two most important are:

- The Nile Valley, or Upper Egypt, which is about 1000 km long from the first cataract or rapids at Aswan (site of a major dam today) and the base of the Nile Delta. It is a narrow valley: the cultivatable area between limestone uplands is no more than 21 km wide at any given place.
- Just north of present-day Cairo, however, the Nile branches out into a delta, known as Lower Egypt. Though Lower Egypt is much shorter on the map, about 250 km, it is wider, and in usable land it is about the same size as Upper Egypt.
The contrast between the flood plains of the Nile and the desert is stark. One can stand with one foot on red sand, useless for agriculture, and the other on the black, rich earth that has fed millions of people for thousands of years. Egypt as we know it was a product of climactic change. As the glaciers began to retreat, North Africa dried out, and the Nile Valley became increasingly attractive. But for a very long time, the 10,000 years before 5000 B.C., agriculture did not develop in Egypt. This is because the valley was a vast marsh, even a jungle, where Neolithic hunters and fishers could make an easy living.

Agriculture developed rather slowly in the face of this wild bounty. It perhaps became widespread because population growth led to over-hunting. Long after food production was commonplace in the country north of Mesopotamia, but about the same time that farming was being introduced into Sumeria, the Egyptians began to rely primarily on growing grain and domesticated animals. Once they did this they developed a way of life that took maximum advantage of the peculiar rhythms of the Nile. Since there is almost no rain in Egypt, the northern Nile that runs through Egypt depends entirely on two rivers in the south, the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The Blue Nile, which joins the White Nile at Khartoum, rises in Ethiopia and has a seasonal flow. The Ethiopian summer monsoon creates flooding all along the river's course, all the way to the Mediterranean. In Egypt, the river starts to rise in July, and the real floods begin in August. From late August to mid-September most of the valley floor is covered with water, everything except the high spots where villages and cities sit, and the built-up roadbeds between them. Actually, I should have spoken in the past tense. Since the 19th century, dams have evened out the Nile's flow, and the one aspect of ancient Egypt that you cannot see today is the annual flood.

When the flood took place, it served as natural irrigation and more. Unlike the human-induced irrigation of Mesopotamia or other areas, it regularly renewed the soil by depositing new silt on the fields. Again, unlike artificial irrigation, it washed salt out of the soil, thus preventing the deadly buildup common elsewhere. (This is why the current system may eventually doom Egypt to sterility.) Further, the flood is well placed in the agricultural year. With hard work and organization, the Nile floods made possible extraordinary productivity. Farmers could bring in two whole crops. They could also create dikes and canals to maximize the area watered and fertilized by the river. During the fourth millenium B.C., between 4000 and 3000, this situation allowed the growth of social stratification and eventually monarchy. Aristocracies brought the farmers under their control and lived off the surplus they created. They justified their existence by organizing irrigation and work-schedules to make the surplus as big as possible. (Some scholars say that all the organization was done
on the local level and that the rulers were entirely parasitical.)
The consolidation of Egypt was a slow process. However, the river below the first
cataract, is a strong centralizing force. In the years just before 3000 B.C., Egypt
had only two monarchies, one for Upper Egypt, the other for Lower. There was a
period of rivalry, which may be reflected in the myth of Osiris. Osiris, later the
god of the dead, or one of them, was originally the god of the Delta, of Lower
Egypt. In the myth he was killed by Seth, the god of Upper Egypt. The death of
Osiris is a key episode in mythology; the conquest of Lower Egypt by Upper
Egypt, which took place around 2900 B.C., was equally key in history. Henceforth
one man would wear the white, conical crown of Upper Egypt and the red, open
crown of the Delta. Indeed, for ancient Egyptians, it was the beginning of history,
and everything that happened before the unification was obscure. And because it
was obscure to them, it is obscure to us, too.
I should pause to say something about our sources for Egyptian history. The most
important records we have are lists of kings, which give us a chronological
framework. The master list is a very late document, compiled in Greek by an
Egyptian priest named Manetho who lived sometime after 323 B.C. Manetho
divided the rulers of Egypt into 31 dynasties of royal families, and noted the
length of each king's reign and the length of each dynasty's power.
Modern Egyptologists have found some much earlier dynastic lists, and they do
correspond to Manetho's in many of their features. In particular, they all say that
the first king of the Two Kingdoms was Menes (to give the Greek version of his
name). They all assume that nothing interesting happened before Menes. They all
identify Egyptian history with the history of her kings. To a great extent, we are
locked into this scheme whether we like it or not. As in Mesopotamia, kingship,
once well established, sold itself as a divine institution and obliterated the memory
of what had gone before.
(It's interesting to note, however, that very recent work has discovered earlier
kings and dynasties unknown to ancient Egyptian record-keepers. You now find
discussions of "Dynasty 0" and even "Dynasty 00."

Only in Egypt, the obliteration was even more complete. Egypt, in fact, is an ideal
country for monarchical rule. There is:
• one major means of communication;
• one dominant ecological and economic factor which affects the whole land much
  the same way;
• room for an elite to control and intensify the efforts of the agricultural
  population (through irrigation);
• no place for dissidents to run to, to regroup and return, because nothing can grow
  outside the valley.
So just as in Mesopotamia, a few people were able to build up an administrative,
bureaucratic monarchy, and enjoy the fruits of imperial rule, except that
centralization was more complete in Egypt than in Iraq. Although contact and
trade with the outside existed from early times, it remains true that access to
Egypt was quite limited, and that meant security for Egyptian kings. There were
always immigrants and raiders, but they were small in number compared to the
immense Egyptian population, which may have reached 5 million people in
dynastic times.
Those five million were not very militarily minded, but their kings were the
masters of such great resources that they were able to hold their own most of the
time. The image of Egypt as seen by the of the ancient Hebrews as told (recorded
in the Biblical book of Exodus) is relevant here. Egypt is visualized as land of
great wealth and power, wealth that the Hebrews wished to share, power that they
were very wary of, and knew they could not overcome except with supernatural
help. It was proof of their God's power that he delivered them from slavery in
Egypt.
This picture helps explain why Egypt suffered no dramatic conquests until around
1700 B.C., when a chariot-riding group known as the Hyksos established their
own dynasty in Lower Egypt.
Because the Egyptian establishment controlled the country so completely, and had
little fear of outsiders, its court culture stayed the same through many hundreds of
years. The court culture included all, or almost all, manifestations of literacy,
including all literature. The word scribe, to modern ears, does not suggest an
exalted station in life. In Egypt, however, it was different. To be a scribe was to be
excused from the hard physical labor that all Egyptians prayed to avoid.
A sample composition for Egyptian students of the late second millenium
encouraged them to stick with their schooling:
You set your mind on working in the fields and neglect texts. Do you not consider
how things are with the farmer, when the harvest is taxed? Grubs have taken half
the corn, the hippopotamus has eaten from what is left. There are mice in the field
and the locust swarm has come. Cattle munch and birds steal. What remains to
reach the threshing floor, the thieves make off with. Now the scribe lands on the
bank and wants to register the harvest. His attendants carry sticks, the Nubian
police wield truncheons. They say: "Hand over the corn!" The farmer answers:
"There is none here." He is stretched out and beaten. He is bound and thrown into
the water...His wife is bound in his presence. His neighbors abandon them and
take to flight. But the scribe organizes the work of everyone. For him there are no
taxes, for he pays his dues by writing.
Thus when we read anything from Egypt, we are listening to the voice of the
establishment. This is usually obvious: Most of the writing that is left, unlike in
Mesopotamia, is not record-keeping, but the praise of the king who owned all
Egypt, who ensured the return of the annual flood, who made everything work, if one is to believe the inscriptions, by his own personal efforts, who was almost one of the gods himself. In the land of the Nile, the language and ideology of power, the language of divinity and life unending, was as predictable and almost as eternal as the river Nile.

This imposing tradition impressed Egypt's neighbors as much as it does people today. Well before the Christian era, Egypt had made itself a name as a land of mystic wisdom. Its gods had a special prestige.

Consider, for instance, this story told by Herodotus, about the pioneering Greek geographer Hecataeus:

When Hecataeus was in Thebes in Egypt, the priests of Zeus [perhaps this was Osiris?], after listening to the attempt he made to trace his family back to a god in the sixteenth generation, did to him precisely what they did to me -- though unlike Hecataeus, I kept clear of personal genealogies. They took me into the great hall of the temple, and showed me the wooden statues [of the high priests] there, which they counted; and the number was [341], for each high priest has a statue of himself erected there before he dies...they assured me that each had been the son of the one who preceded him. When Hecataeus traced his genealogy and connected himself with a god sixteen generations back, the priests refused to believe him...{Book 2, 141, rearranged}.

The antiquity of Egypt and its sacred institutions was a humbling experience not only to Hecataeus, but all Greeks, and many other younger peoples as well.

BIBLIOGRAPHY