

Ancient Egypt

“Walk Like an Egyptian”

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. While the people of the Fertile Crescent were farming and fighting, a beautiful civilization grew along the upper part of the Nile River in Lower Egypt. These were the Egyptians, a people with unique customs and impressive architecture.

Notes

Perhaps no other nation owes more to a river than Egypt. The Nile made life in the dry desert possible. In fact, the entire country is sometimes called “the gift of the Nile.” The Nile River Valley is practically rainless—without the river there would be no water; without water, there would be no life. Each year the Nile floods in a very predictable way, leaving behind silt, which is rich and fertile soil. Farmers figured this out early, and were able to use the river to grow and irrigate their crops. The river was also used for travel, and most of Egyptian life took place along it. It was so important to the early civilization that all of ancient Egypt’s cities were built at its side. The vast majority of the population of modern Egypt still lives right along the banks of the Nile today.

2. The Egyptians were some of the first people to ever write anything down. They used a system of symbols called hieroglyphics to communicate as early as 3300 BCE. There were as many as 2,000 symbols; each one represented an idea, object or even a sound. They were usually carved into stone. Some scribes made paper from papyrus reeds. They laid the reeds down and pounded them into paper, which was lighter and easier to transport than rocks. They called the paper papyrus.

Notes

For thousands of years after the end of the ancient Egyptian civilization, people couldn’t read the symbols. This all changed in 1799, when archaeologists found a stone in an Egyptian town called Rosetta. This stone, now called the Rosetta Stone, has three different languages written on it. Because the same passage is written in Greek, demotic (another ancient language) and hieroglyphics, historians have been able to figure out the meaning of many hieroglyphic symbols. The stone effectively translated the language of ancient Egypt into words that historians could understand.

3. Egyptians believed very strongly in an afterlife. We know from their Book of the Dead that after death, a person's soul travels to the hall of the dead. There, the dead person's heart is said to be weighed against a "feather of truth." If the heart weighed less than the feather, then it was considered a good heart. The person's soul was taken to Osiris, god of the afterlife. If the heart was heavy, though, it was said that a person was evil. That heart would be eaten by a demon that was part crocodile, part lion and part hippopotamus.

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Even the pharaohs, or kings, were anxious about what happened to them after they died. They wanted to bring their favorite things with them, and they believed that in order for their soul to exist in an afterlife, their bodies must be preserved. Thus mummification was invented. They removed the internal organs and placed them in specially decorated urns called canopic jars, dried the body with special salts and oils and wrapped it with linens. And they did a good job of it: Some mummies were still whole when archaeologists opened their tombs 2,000 years later.

4. Ancient Egyptian kings were called pharaohs. The first pharaoh historians know about was Menes, who ruled around 3100 BCE and is known for uniting all of the Egyptians communities. He set things up so that his family would be in power for a long time to come: He started a dynasty.

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King Tut is probably the only Egyptian whose name is known to almost everyone in America. As pharaohs go, Tutankhamun (c. 1341-1323 BCE) wasn't much of one. He took the throne when he was still a boy of nine, and he died at the age of 18. He owes his legacy to British Egyptologist Howard Carter, who dug up his tomb in 1922. It was full of amazing gold and artifacts because it hadn't been looted the way so many Egyptian tombs had. Inside was a wealth of treasures and a lot of information about ancient Egyptian life. One of the men who opened King Tut's tomb with Carter died shortly thereafter, giving birth to the idea of the "curse of the mummy" that's been made into many movies since.

5. If you want to talk about great pharaohs, Ramses (II) is the name to remember. There were a lot of Ramses but only one Ramses the Great (c. 1303-1213 BCE). He came to power not long after Tutankhamen and began to rebuild the Egyptian empire that had been lost under some of his predecessors. His reign was noted for the sheer number of buildings he had constructed—more than any other pharaoh. Ramses' most famous structure was at Abu Simbel in the south of the country. It featured four massive statues of Ramses himself. He was so revered by his successors that 10 other pharaohs took his name. It was under Ramses II that Egypt enjoyed the apex of its power. His mummy, like King Tut's, was found well preserved.

There were not many female pharaohs; of them, Hatshepsut (1473-1458 BCE) was the first and longest ruling of all. When her two brothers died, she was the next in line. She faced many difficulties being a woman in a traditionally male role. However, Hatshepsut was able to get quite a lot done during her 15-year reign—she built more temples and statuary than any other Egyptian queen.

6. As you can imagine from the sheer size of them, building the pyramids was a monumental effort. These gigantic gravestones were marvels of early architecture and engineering. In the city of Cairo alone there were 67 of them. Ancient Egyptians didn't have huge trucks, cranes or earthmovers. They had to do all of the work with manpower alone.

The pyramids were built not as apartments for the living, but as amazingly large tombs for the dead. The biggest pyramid of all belonged to King Khufu (2585-2560 BCE), whom the Greeks called Cheops. Khufu ordered the Great Pyramid of Giza built. It covered 13 acres and rose almost 500 feet up into the air—about as tall as a 50-story building.

Many pyramid complexes included statues of sphinxes, mythical creatures with the head of a human and the body of a lion. It was a tradition for pharaohs to have their heads carved into the sphinx that sat atop their tomb.

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