



## 2 Pyramids on the Nile

### TERMS & NAMES

- cataract
- delta
- Menes
- pharaoh
- theocracy
- pyramid
- mummification
- hieroglyphics
- papyrus

#### MAIN IDEA

Along the Nile River, civilization emerged in Egypt and became united into a kingdom ruled by pharaohs.

#### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Many of the monuments built by the Egyptians stand as a testament to their ancient civilization.

**SETTING THE STAGE** To the west of the Fertile Crescent in Africa, another river makes its way to the sea. While Sumerian civilization was on the rise, a similar process took place along the banks of this river, the Nile in Egypt. Yet the Egyptian civilization turned out to be very different from the collection of city-states in Mesopotamia. Early on, Egypt was united into a single kingdom, which allowed it to enjoy a high degree of unity, stability, and cultural continuity over a period of 3,000 years.

### The Geography of Egypt

From the highlands of east-central Africa to the Mediterranean Sea, the Nile River flows northward for over 4,100 miles, making it the longest river in the world. (See the map on page 34.) A thin ribbon of water in a parched desert land, the great river brings its water to Egypt from distant mountains, plateaus, and lakes in present-day Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia.

Egypt's settlements arose along the Nile on a narrow strip of land made fertile by the river. The change from fertile soil to desert—from the Black Land to the Red Land—was so abrupt that a person could stand with one foot in each.

**The Gift of the Nile** As in Mesopotamia, yearly flooding brought the water and rich soil that allowed settlements to grow. Every year in July, rains and melting snow from the mountains of east-central Africa caused the Nile River to rise and spill over its banks. When the river receded in October, it left behind a rich deposit of fertile black mud.

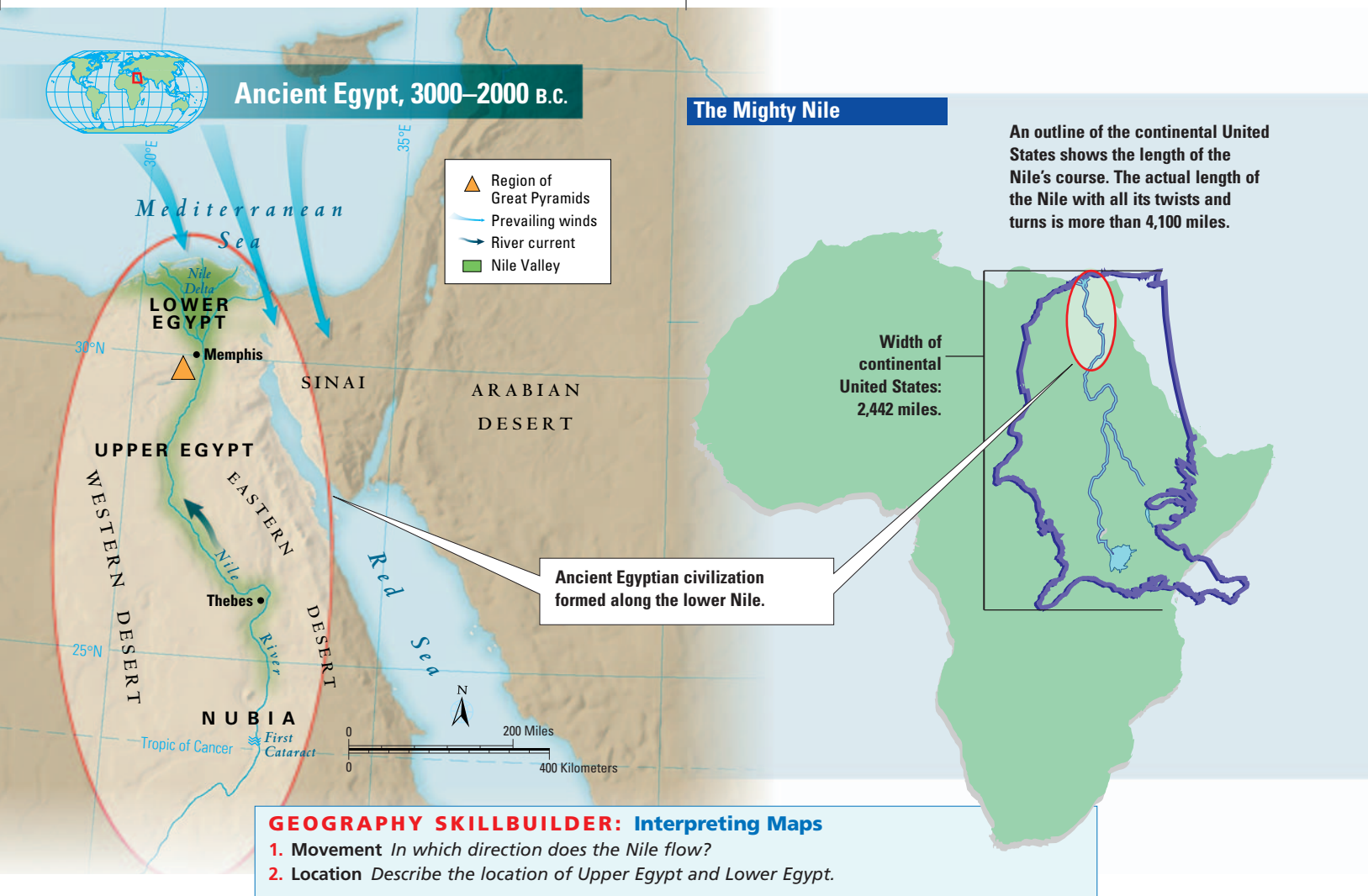
Before the scorching sun could dry out the soil, the peasants would hitch their cattle to plows and prepare their fields for planting. All fall and winter, they tended the wheat and barley plants. They watered their crops from an intricate network of irrigation ditches. At last came the welcome harvest. This cycle repeated itself year after year—flood, plant, harvest; flood, plant, harvest.

In an otherwise parched land, the abundance brought by the Nile was so great that the Egyptians worshiped it as a god who gave life and seldom turned against them. As the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (hih-RAHD-uh-tuhs) remarked in the fifth century B.C., Egypt was the “gift of the Nile.”

**Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt** For most of their history, ancient Egyptians knew only the lower part of the Nile—the last 750 miles before the river empties north into the Mediterranean Sea. Their domain ended at a point where jagged granite cliffs and boulders turn the river into churning rapids called a **cataract** (KAT-uh-rakt). Riverboats could not pass this spot, known as the First Cataract, to continue upstream to the south.



A traditional sailboat sails the Nile River in Egypt.



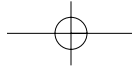
Between the First Cataract and the Mediterranean lay two very different regions. Upper Egypt (to the south) was a skinny strip of land from the First Cataract to the point where the river starts to fan out into many branches. Lower Egypt (to the north, near the sea) consisted of the Nile **delta** region, which begins about 100 miles before the river enters the Mediterranean. The delta is a broad, marshy, triangular area of land formed by deposits of silt at the mouth of the river. This rich land provided a home for many birds and wild animals.

The Nile provided a reliable system of transportation between Upper and Lower Egypt. The Nile flows north, so northbound boats simply drifted with the current. Southbound boats hoisted a wide sail. The prevailing winds of Egypt blow from north to south, carrying sailboats against the river current. The ease of contact made possible by this watery highway helped unify Egypt's villages and promote trade.

**Environmental Challenges** Egyptian farmers were much more fortunate than the villagers of Mesopotamia. Compared to the unpredictable Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the Nile was as regular as clockwork. Even so, life in Egypt had its risks. If the Nile's floodwaters were just a few feet lower than normal, the amount of fresh silt and water for crops was greatly reduced. Thousands of people might starve. If the floodwaters were a few feet higher than usual, the water would spread beyond the fields to the mud-brick villages nearby. The unwanted water might destroy houses, granaries, and the precious seeds that farmers needed for planting.

The vast and forbidding deserts on either side of the Nile acted as natural barriers between Egypt and other lands. They forced Egyptians to stay close to the river, their lifeline, which reduced their interaction with other peoples. At the same time, the deserts also shut out invaders. For much of its early history, Egypt was spared the constant warfare that plagued the Fertile Crescent.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**A. Contrasting**  
 What was the main difference between the flooding of the Nile and that of the rivers in Mesopotamia?



**Movement of Goods and Ideas** By 3200 B.C., Egyptians were coming into contact with the people of Mesopotamia. Caravans loaded with goods for trade were traveling between the two regions. By about 2000 B.C., Egyptian traders were also traveling up the Nile on barges to the lands of Nubia and Kush to the south. They were in search of such goods as gold, ivory, cattle, and granite blocks for their massive temples and tombs.

Whole groups of people seem to have moved freely from one region to another in search of better land for farming or grazing. The early Egyptians may have borrowed some ideas from the Mesopotamians in the early development of their cities and in their system of writing. However, the period of Mesopotamian influence ended quickly. From then on, Egypt followed its own cultural path, which was very different from Mesopotamia's. Egypt blended the cultures of the Nile Valley peoples with the cultures of peoples who migrated into the valley from other parts of Africa and from the Fertile Crescent. Egypt thus was a land of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity throughout its 3,000-year history.

## Egypt Unites into a Kingdom

Egyptians lived in farming villages as far back as 5000 B.C., perhaps even earlier. Each village had its own rituals, gods, and chieftain. By 3200 B.C., the villages of Egypt were under the rule of two separate kingdoms, Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt.

According to legend, the king of Lower Egypt wore a red crown, and the king of Upper Egypt wore a tall white crown shaped like a bowling pin. About 3100 B.C., a strong-willed king of Upper Egypt named **Menes** (MEE.neez) united all of Egypt. As a symbol of his united kingdom, Menes created a double crown from the red and white crowns. Menes shrewdly established his capital, Memphis, near the spot where Upper and Lower Egypt met, and established the first Egyptian dynasty. Eventually, the history of ancient Egypt would consist of 31 dynasties, spanning 2,600 years.

Little is known of Egypt's first two dynasties, but records improve with the Third Dynasty. The Third Dynasty begins the period historians call the Old Kingdom, which lasted from 2660 to 2180 B.C. The Old Kingdom set the pattern for Egypt's great civilization.

**Pharaohs Rule as Gods** The role of the king was one striking difference between Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Mesopotamia, kings were considered to be representatives of the gods. To the Egyptians, kings *were* gods, almost as splendid and powerful as the gods of the heavens. The Egyptian god-kings came to be called **pharaohs** (FAIR.ohz).

The pharaoh stood at the center of Egypt's religion as well as its government and army. This type of government in which the ruler is a divine figure is called a **theocracy**. Egyptians believed that the pharaoh bore full responsibility for the kingdom's well-being. It was the pharaoh who caused the sun to rise, the Nile to flood, and the crops to grow. It was the pharaoh's duty to promote truth and justice.

**Builders of the Pyramids** Egyptians believed that their king ruled even after his death. He had an eternal spirit, or *ka* (kah), which continued to take part in the governing of Egypt. In the Egyptian's mind, the *ka* remained much like a living king in its needs and pleasures. Since kings expected to reign forever, their tombs were even more important than their palaces. For the kings of the Old Kingdom, the resting place after death was an immense structure called a **pyramid**. The Old Kingdom was the great age of pyramid building in ancient Egypt.

## HISTORY MAKERS

### Menes

Who was Menes? Did he exist at all? Historians cannot answer these questions, because the evidence of this early period is very limited. Written accounts of Menes' accomplishments were recorded hundreds or even thousands of years later. By then, Menes had become a legendary hero.

In the retelling, Menes' deeds became imaginary myths. According to one story, Menes finally died after a long and triumphant reign when he was carried off and killed by a hippopotamus.



crown of  
Upper Egypt

crown of Upper  
and Lower Egypt

crown of  
Lower Egypt

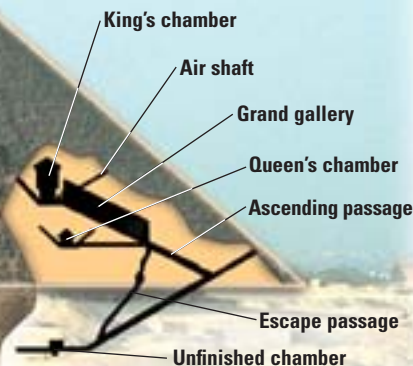
### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

#### B. Making

**Inferences** Why were Egypt's pharaohs unusually powerful rulers?



The largest of the pyramids is the Great Pyramid (right background) at Giza, completed about 2556 B.C. The diagram shows how the interior of a pyramid looks.



## Daily Life

### Builders of the Pyramids

Etched into some of the stones of the pyramids are the nicknames of the teams of workers who built them—"the Victorious Gang," "the Enduring Gang," and "the Craftsman Gang," for example. Just as construction workers today leave their marks on the skyscrapers they build, the pyramid builders scratched messages for the ages inside the pyramids.

Who were the pyramid builders? The ancient Greek historian Herodotus claimed that the pharaohs worked an army of laborers to death. However, it was actually peasants who provided most of the labor. They had to work for the government when the Nile was in flood and they could not farm. In return for their service, the country provided the workers with food and housing during this period.

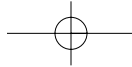
These magnificent monuments were remarkable engineering achievements, built by people who had not even begun to use the wheel. Unlike the Sumerians, however, the Egyptians did have a good supply of stone, both granite and limestone. For the Great Pyramid of Giza, for example, the limestone facing was quarried 400 miles upriver. Each perfectly cut stone block weighed at least 2 1/2 tons. Some weighed 15 tons. More than 2 million of these blocks were stacked with precision to a height of 481 feet. The entire structure covered more than 13 acres.

The pyramids also reflect the strength of the Egyptian civilization. They show that Old Kingdom dynasties had developed the economic strength to support massive public works projects, as well as the leadership and government organization to carry them out.

## Egyptian Culture

With nature so much in their favor, Egyptians tended to approach life more confidently and optimistically than their neighbors in the Fertile Crescent.

**Religion and Life** Like the Mesopotamians, the early Egyptians were polytheistic, believing in many gods. The most important gods were Ra, the sun god, and Horus, the god of light. The most important goddess was Isis, who represented the ideal mother and wife. In all, Egyptians worshiped more than 2,000 gods and goddesses. They built huge temples to honor the major deities.



In contrast to the Mesopotamians, with their bleak view of death, Egyptians believed in an afterlife, a life that continued after death. Egyptians believed they would be judged for their deeds when they died. Osiris (oh-SY-rihs), the powerful god of the dead, would weigh each dead person's heart. To win eternal life, the heart could be no heavier than a feather. If the heart tipped the scale, showing that it was heavy with sin, a fierce beast known as the Devourer of Souls would pounce on the impure heart and gobble it up. But if the soul passed this test for purity and truth, it would live forever in the beautiful Other World.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

##### C. Analyzing

**Motives** Why do you think the Egyptians used mummification? How does it reflect their religious beliefs?

People of all classes planned for their burials, so that they might safely reach the Other World. Kings and queens built great tombs, such as the pyramids, and other Egyptians built smaller tombs. Egyptians preserved a dead person's body by **mummification**—embalming and drying the corpse to prevent it from decaying. (See Something in Common, pages 40–41.) Scholars still accept Herodotus' description of the process of mummification.

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

First, they draw out the brains through the nostrils with an iron hook. . . . Then with a sharp stone they make an incision in the side, and take out all the bowels. . . . Then, having filled the belly with pure myrrh, cassia, and other perfumes, they sew it up again; and when they have done this they steep it in natron [a mineral salt], leaving it under for 70 days. . . . At the end of 70 days, they wash the corpse, and wrap the whole body in bandages of waxen cloth.

HERODOTUS, *The History of Herodotus*

Attendants placed the mummy in a coffin inside a tomb. Then they filled the tomb with items the dead person could use in the afterlife, such as clothing, food, cosmetics, and jewelry. Many Egyptians purchased scrolls that contained hymns, prayers, and magic spells intended to guide the soul in the afterlife. This collection of texts is known as the *Book of the Dead*. These texts often contained declarations intended to prove the soul was worthy of eternal life.

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Behold, I have come to you, I have brought you truth, I have repelled falsehood for you. I have not done falsehood against men, I have not impoverished my associates, I have done no wrong in the Place of Truth, I have not learnt that which is not, I have done no evil. . . . I have not caused pain, I have not made hungry, I have not made to weep, I have not killed, I have not commanded to kill, I have not made suffering for anyone. . . . I am pure, pure, pure, pure!

*Book of the Dead*, translated by Raymond O. Faulkner

**Life in Egyptian Society** Like the grand monuments to the kings, Egyptian society formed a pyramid. The king, queen, and royal family stood at the top. Below them were the other members of the upper class, which included wealthy landowners, government officials, priests, and army commanders. The next tier of the pyramid was the middle class, which included merchants and artisans. At the base of the pyramid was the lower class, by far the largest class. It consisted of peasant farmers and unskilled laborers.

In the later periods of Egyptian history, slavery became a widespread source of labor. Slaves, usually captives from foreign wars, served in the homes of the rich or toiled endlessly in the gold mines of Upper Egypt.

The Egyptians were not locked into their social classes. Lower- and middle-class Egyptians could gain higher status through

## Daily Life



### Egyptian Cosmetics

The dark-lined eyes that look out at us from the artwork of ancient Egypt were the height of fashion 3,000 years ago. Men and women applied the makeup, called kohl, to their eyes with small sticks. They made kohl from powdered minerals mixed with water.

The Egyptians also wore lipstick, made from powdered red ocher (iron oxide) mixed with oil. They soaked flowers and fragrant woods in oil and rubbed the oil into their skin. Sometimes they decked their hairdos with cones of scented wax, which melted slowly in the heat.

These cosmetics were more than just beauty aids. The dark eye makeup softened the glare of the desert sun. The oils protected skin, lips, and hair from the dry desert air. Egyptians kept their cosmetics in chests such as the one shown above, which was found in an Egyptian tomb.



marriage or success in their jobs. Even some slaves could hope to earn their freedom as a reward for their loyal service. To win the highest positions, people had to be able to read and write. Once a person had these skills, many careers were open in the army, the royal treasury, the priesthood, and the king's court.

## SPOTLIGHT ON

### The Rosetta Stone

Although it lasted more than 2,500 years, Egyptian civilization eventually declined. Soon after, the ability to read hieroglyphics was lost and remained so for many centuries.

In 1799, near the delta village of Rosetta, some French soldiers found a polished black stone inscribed with a message in three languages. One version was written in hieroglyphics (top inset). A second version was in a simpler form of hieroglyphics and the third was in Greek (both are shown in the bottom inset).

Since ancient Greek was a well-known language, it provided clues to the meaning of the hieroglyphics. Still, deciphering the Rosetta Stone took many years. In 1822, a French scholar named Jean François Champollion (shahm-paw.LYAWN) finally broke the code of the hieroglyphics.

Women in Egypt held many of the same rights as men. For example, a wealthy or middle-class woman could own and trade property. She could propose marriage or seek divorce. If she were granted a divorce, she would be entitled to one-third of the couple's property.

**Egyptian Writing** As in Mesopotamia, the development of writing was one of the keys to the growth of Egyptian civilization. Crude pictographs were the earliest form of writing in Egypt, but scribes quickly developed a more flexible writing system called **hieroglyphics** (HY-ur-uh.GLIHF:ihks). This term comes from the Greek words *hieros* and *gluphē*, meaning "sacred carving."

As with Sumerian cuneiform writing, in the earliest form of hieroglyphics a picture stood for an idea. For instance, a picture of a man stood for the idea of a man; a picture of a bird stood for the idea of a bird. In time, the system changed so that pictures stood for sounds as well as ideas. The owl, for example, stood for an *m* sound. Hieroglyphics could be used almost like letters of the alphabet.

Although hieroglyphics were first written on stone and clay, as in Mesopotamia, the Egyptians soon invented a better writing surface. They used another gift of the Nile, the tall stalks of the **papyrus** (puh-PY.ruhs) reeds that grew in the marshy delta. The Egyptians split the reeds into narrow strips, dampened them, and then pressed them. As the papyrus dried, the plant's sap glued the strips together into a paperlike sheet.

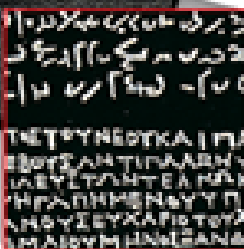
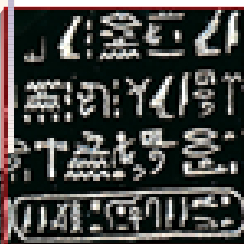
**Egyptian Science and Technology** Practical needs led to many Egyptian inventions. In order to assess and collect taxes, the Egyptians developed a system of written numbers for counting, adding, and subtracting. Farmers used an early form of geometry to survey and reset property boundaries after the annual floods.

Mathematical knowledge helped Egypt's skillful engineers and architects as well. Builders needed to make accurate calculations and measurements to construct their remarkable pyramids and palaces. Egyptian architects were also the first to use stone columns in homes, palaces, and temples.

To help them keep track of the time between floods and plan their planting season, the Egyptians developed a calendar. Egyptian priests had

### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

**D. Comparing** How was the status of women similar in Egyptian and Sumerian society?





This detail from a tomb painting shows how the Egyptians grew their grain.

observed that a very bright star, now known as Sirius, began to appear above the eastern horizon just before the floods came. The time between one rising of Sirius and the next was 365 days. They divided this year into 12 months of 30 days each and added five days for holidays and feasting. This calendar was so accurate that it fell short of the true solar year by only six hours.

Egyptian medicine was also famous in the ancient world. Although Egyptian medical writings contain all sorts of magic charms and chants, Egyptian doctors also relied on practical knowledge. They knew how to check a person's heart rate by feeling for a pulse in different parts of the body. They set splints for broken bones and had effective treatments for wounds and fevers. They also used surgery to treat some conditions. All in all, the Egyptians approached their study of medicine in a remarkably scientific way.

#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY

##### E. Summarizing

What were the main achievements of the ancient Egyptians?

## Chariot Riders Invade Egypt

The power of the pharaohs declined about 2180 B.C., marking the end of the Old Kingdom. Historians call the period of weakness and turmoil that followed the First Intermediate Period. Strong pharaohs regained control during the Middle Kingdom (2080–1640 B.C.) and restored law and order. They improved trade and transportation by having a canal dug from the Nile to the Red Sea. With the wealth from new trade, the kings undertook other public projects. They had huge dikes built to trap and channel the Nile's floodwaters for irrigation. They also created thousands of new acres of farmland by draining the swamps of Lower Egypt.

The prosperity of the Middle Kingdom did not last. In about 1640 B.C., a group of Asian nomads swept across the Isthmus of Suez into Egypt in horse-drawn chariots. These chariot-riders were the Hyksos (HIHK-sahs), which meant "the rulers of the uplands." The Hyksos ruled much of Egypt from 1640 to 1570 B.C. This 70-year period is sometimes called the Second Intermediate Period.

Egypt fell to the Hyksos at roughly the same time other nomads were invading Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley farther to the east. But Egypt would rise again for a new period of power and glory, the New Kingdom, which is discussed in Chapter 4.

## Section 2 Assessment

### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- cataract
- delta
- Menes
- pharaoh
- theocracy
- pyramid
- mummification
- hieroglyphics
- papyrus

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Recreate the web below on your paper and fill in examples related to the main idea in the center.



Which would you consider most important? Why?

### 3. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Look at the map on page 34. Three natural features determined the boundaries of ancient Egyptian civilization: the Nile River, the First Cataract, and the surrounding desert. In your judgment, which of these features was most important to Egypt's history? Explain your conclusion.

### 4. THEME ACTIVITY

#### Interaction with Environment

Using information from Sections 1 and 2, create a chart, sketch, or drawing to show how Sumerians and Egyptians made use of their environment. Then tell which group you think made better use of what they had. Be prepared to defend your opinions.



## SOMETHING IN COMMON *across cultures*

# Dealing with Death

All humans face death. Anthropologists believe that religious beliefs grew out of humanity's attempts to explain what happens after death. The Egyptians wrapped their dead as mummies to preserve the body for an afterlife. The ways other cultures treat their dead reveal their own beliefs about God and the soul. As you compare and contrast the customs on these pages, look for how they are influenced by the religious beliefs of the people who practice them.



### Ancient Egypt

Among the first people to believe in life after death, the ancient Egyptians mummified the body so the soul could return to it later. Embalmers used chemicals to dry out the body. Then they wrapped the mummy in fine linen and adorned it with jewelry. Egyptian embalmers were so skillful that modern archaeologists have found mummies that still have hair, skin, and teeth thousands of years after burial.

### 9th-Century Ireland

Christians believe that the dead will be resurrected—brought back to life—before the time of final judgment. Until modern times, therefore, the Roman Catholic Church discouraged cremation. Since the first century A.D., Christians have buried their dead in cemeteries and marked each grave with a stone, a monument, or a cross. The carvings on this 9th-century Irish cross reflect Christian symbolism.



**a**  
**closer**  
**look** EGYPTIAN MUMMIES

The Egyptians also mummified the pets of the deceased. These are mummies of a cat and a dog.



These clay vessels are called Canopic jars. After preparing the mummy, embalmers placed the brain, liver, and other internal organs of the mummy in these jars.







### Modern Bali

Hindus cremate, or burn, their dead. They consider the body as just a container for a soul that never dies. After a person dies, they believe the soul is reborn in another person. Hindu cremations are sacred rituals. On the Indonesian island of Bali, these rituals involve an elaborate celebration. Several bodies are put in a tall tower made of wood and bamboo, such as the one pictured at right. The whole tower is burned and the ashes scattered in the ocean.



### 19th-Century Native Americans

Just as Native American languages and lifestyles varied widely, so did Native American customs for dealing with the dead. Many 19th-century Plains Indians, such as the Sioux and the Blackfeet (pictured below), placed their dead on raised platforms. This protected the bodies from wild animals and also lifted the dead closer to the sky, where many spirits were believed to dwell.



This solid gold death mask of the pharaoh Tutankhamen covered the head of his mummy. The mask, which weighs 22.5 pounds, is part of a popular exhibit in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Egypt.

#### Connect to History

**Recognizing Effects** Which groups believed in preserving the body after death? How did those religious beliefs affect their customs?

 SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R6

#### Connect to Today

**Reporting** Find out about modern Jewish and Muslim burial practices. Illustrate each of these with a picture and a caption like those above. Then write a paragraph comparing them to either Christian or Hindu practices.