

## EGYPT: LAND OF A GLORIOUS AND ENVIABLE PAST (SOME OBSERVATIONS)

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The following is an illustration of Egypt's greatness under the rule of the mighty Pharaohs. The Great Pharaohs of this era included Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, Thutmose II, Queen Hatsheput, Thutmose III and Amenhotep II, spanning a time period of between 1546 B.C. to 1425 B.C. Egypt, by all accounts, was a sophisticated land and its culture was regarded as advanced for its time. The Egyptian language of hieroglyphics was no simple medium of communication. Hieroglyphics is by far the most difficult language ever put into writing. It uses pictographs and not characters. Present day scholars are of the opinion that the study of this language involves a lifetime of mastery even for the brilliant. The nation had the best universities of their time, not to mention an enviable economic situation.

For educational purposes, Egyptian children of royalty and the elite attended the Temple of the Sun which has been regarded by many as "the Oxford of the ancient world". Students entering this "university" began by studying basic hieroglyphics. At the Temple of the Sun, the youngsters would also have mastered the sciences, medicine, astronomy, chemistry, theology, philosophy and law. They were also co-opted into our present day equivalent of the national service where these youngsters would study battles, combat strategies and tactics as well as identify the nation's chief foes. In addition, students studied music, sculpture and painting - altogether a thorough, tough, and wholesome education. However, the students at the Temple of the Sun were not forced

to choose between mastery in the arts and mastery in the sciences at an early age. They learned them all and were expected to master them all. Little wonder that Egypt soared to such great heights in its heyday.

Such a sophisticated culture, without a doubt, expected a level of sophistication from all guests visiting the country. A story is told that if foreign shepherds wanted to make a life in Egypt, they were advised to be politically correct and to inform the powers that be that they were in fact “keepers of livestock” rather than shepherds who were viewed as loathsome by the Egyptians. It appears then, that to have survived in sophisticated Egypt of old, one would need to know the codes of behavior and self-presentation that were acceptable in that culture. In this regard, men were expected to be always clean-shaven. Bearded faces were frowned upon.

The River Nile was truly “the centerpiece” of this once advanced and powerful nation. It served as an abundant source of water for Egyptian crops and livestock in addition to meeting the myriad needs of its people. The river provided a fresh supply of fish which made these Egyptians avid fish eaters. Historical documents note that, in addition to fish, the Egyptian diet included more than its fair share of leeks and garlic. Wheat was a staple for them.

Ancient Egypt believed that the Sun God was the god of the Nile Valley. This god was believed to be the source of fertility to the land. Archaeological digs in recent years have revealed an ancient religious oath enunciated to the god of Nile Valley. The oath reads as follows:

*I have afflicted no man. I have not made any man weep. I have not withheld milk from the mouth of sucklings.*

In making such a vow, many believed they had secured for themselves a continuous and plenteous supply of provision from the god of the Nile. Scholars who write about the era of Egypt's greatness posit that the land was, by far, the most advanced of any nation that

ever existed except in comparison to Babylon that rose to its glory centuries later. Egypt was a land thriving in remarkable influence, enviable educational advancement, military might and limitless wealth. Sadly, history also notes that the decline of Egypt's greatness began under the rule of Thutmose IV who reigned as Pharaoh after the death of Amenhotep II.

Although it is difficult to identify the precise reason for the decline of Egypt under the ruler of the New Empire, it may be safe to conclude that the relative calm and peace experienced by Egypt, ironically, was one of the reasons for its decline. Just as Tutmose IV formed alliances with independent kings, neighbouring his Syrian tributaries, his son, Amenhotep III, continued the policy of forming alliances through diplomacy and inter-marriages with the royal families of Syria, Babylon and Anatolia. Historians have noted that during Amenhotep III's reign, Egypt was at its greatest splendour because peace reigned in his Empire.

So while Egypt is said to have attained unprecedented achievement in the fields of architecture and sculpture as well as reached the heights of cultural achievement during Amenhotep III's rule, the Pharaohs were not conquering lands and filling the coffers. In fact, historical documents indicate that Amenhotep III invaded Nubia only once as if to suggest that a once-only attack is simply atypical for an Egyptian Pharaoh. Hence, the lack of territorial expansion and the amassing of riches derived from that process could be the premise by which scholars assert the decline of Egypt under the rule of the New Empire.