# Ancient Egypt: Crash Course World History #4

Crash Course: World History
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**=====Intro (00:00)=====**

Hi there my name's John Green and this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to talk about Egypt. No, not that Egypt. Older. Older. Older. Less fictional. Yes, that one.

Ancient Egypt is probably the most influential of the river valley civilizations. Like, you might not recognize any Assyrian Kings or Assyrian language, but you probably do know King Tut. And you may recognize that the Eye of Horus is right now staring at me and judging me. I can feel... I can feel your judgment.

[music intro]

When we think of Ancient Civilizations, we think of Egypt. There are a few reasons for this, like the fact that the pyramids are the last man standing among the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World. But more importantly, Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted from 3000 BCE to 332 BCE. That's a period that historians call a long-ass time. And I will remind you, it is not cursing if you're talking about donkeys.

So, there are many approaches to the study of history. You could view history as a millennia-long conversation about philosophy or as clashes between great men or you can see history through the lens of traditionally neglected populations, like women or indigenous peoples or slaves. And we're going to try to take many approaches to our study of history during Crash Course.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, Mr. Green, which approach is right? I mean, for the test.

Present John: Oh, Me from the Past. Remember how you spent all of third year French writing notes back and forth to that girl, and she eventually agreed to go out with you, and you did make it to second base, but now you can hardly parle un mot de Francois? Historical lenses are like that, my friend - with every choice, something is gained and something is lost.

Right, so in discussing agriculture and early civilizations, we've been approaching history through the lens of resource distribution and geography. And just as the violent and capricious Tigris and Euphrates rivers shaped the worldview of early Mesopotamians, the Nile shaped the worldview of the Egyptians. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

**=====Thought Bubble (1:58)=====**

The Nile was regular, navigable, and benign, making for one of the safest and richest agricultural areas in the world. Each summer, the river flooded the fields at precisely the right time, leaving behind nutrient-rich silt for planting season. Planting was so easy that Egyptians just tossed seeds around the silty earth and then let their cattle or pigs walk on it to press the seeds into the ground, and then boom: grain, and figs, and wheat, and pomegranates, and melons, and joy.

Unlike most river valley civilizations, Egyptian communities existed ONLY along the Nile, which was navigable enough to get valuable resources downstream from timber to gold, which the Egyptians considered the divine metal, thereby introducing an idea that would eventually culminate in Mr. T.

The Nile is also easily tamed. While other river valley civilizations needed complicated and labor-intensive hydraulic engineering projects to irrigate crops, the Nile was so chill that Egyptians could use a simple form of water management called basin irrigation, in which farmers used flood waters to fill earthen basins and canals for irrigation.

In short, the awesomeness of the Nile meant Egyptians could create big food surpluses with relatively little work, allowing time and energy for some pretty impressive projects. Also, the Nile may help explain the ancient Egypt's general optimism. While ancient Sumerian religion, for instance, saw the afterlife as this gloomy, dark place, Egyptians were often buried with things that were useful and pleasurable to them in life, because the Afterlife was seen as a continuation of this life, which, at least if you lived along the Nile, wasn't half-bad.

**=====About the Dynasties (3:28)=====**

Thanks, Thought Bubble. And now, my dear pupils, I shall terrorize you with the oppression of dates. No. Dates. Yes. Thank you. Historians have divided Egyptian history into three broad categories. Each with their own numbered dynasties. But only hardcore Egyptologists know the dynasties, and we're not trying to become hardcore Egyptologists.

The Old Kingdom lasted from 2649 to 2152, the Middle Kingdom from 2040 to 1640, and the New Kingdom, so called because it is only 3,000 years old, lasted from 1550 to 1070 BCE. In between you have a couple so-called Intermediate periods. Okay, OLD KINGDOM. This was really the glory age of ancient Egypt, when we got all the stuff that will later make Indiana Jones possible, like the pyramids at Giza, and the sun king Ra, and the idea of divine kingship.

The king, or pharaoh, was either a god or very close to a god, which seems like a good gig, except that it meant that he wasn't expected to act like a person, he was expected to act like a god, which in ancient Egypt means acting like the Nile: calm, cool, benevolent... there's no fun in that. And then, of course, there are the Pyramids, which, aside from remaining impressive to behold, represent a remarkable degree of political and social control over the population, because it is not easy to convince people to devote their lives to building a sarcophagus for someone else.

The most famous pyramids were built between 2575 and 2465 BCE. The one with the Sphinx was for Khephren; the largest, the Great Pyramid, was built for the Pharaoh Khufu. These pyramids were built partly by peasants who were required by Egyptian law to work for the government a certain number of months per year, and partly by slaves, but not by Moses and the Jews, who showed up on the scene long before the Pyramids were ever even a twinkle in Khufu's eye.

This leads to an overwhelming question: Why? Why in the sweet name of Ra would anyone ever build such a thing? Well, let's start with Ra. So, Ra started out as a regional god, reigning over Heliopolis, but he eventually became really central to the entire pantheon of gods of ancient Egypt. He was the god of the sun, but also the god of creation. And the thinking was that if humans did their jobs, then the pantheon of gods would maintain cosmic order, and since the pharaohs became gods upon their death, it made sense to please them, even unto Pyramids.

Egyptian popular religion also embraced the belief in amulets and magic and divination and the belief that certain animals, especially cats, had divine power. And yes, I did bring that up just so I could lolcat. Old Kingdom Egypt was also remarkably literate. They had two forms of writing: hieroglyphics for sacred writing and then demotic script for recording contracts and agreements and other boring stuff. The last thing I want to say about Old Kingdom Egypt -

it was ridiculously rich.

But then around 2250 BCE there were a series of droughts and Pharaohs started fighting over who should have power and we had an intermediate period. Which was followed by the Middle Earth... No, what? The Middle Kingdom? Ohh. Really? That's a bummer, Stan. I want it to be the Middle Earth. How awesome would that be? Like, right in the middle of Egyptian history, there were Hobbits...

So the Middle Kingdom, which apparently had no Hobbits, restored Pharaonic rule in 2040 BCE but with some distinct changes: First, the rulers were outsiders, from downriver in Nubia. Second, they fostered a new pantheon of gods, the star of which was Amun, which means hidden. So here's a little lesson from history: Hidden gods tend to do well because they're omnipresent.

So Amun eventually merged with Ra to form the god Amun-Ra, who was like the best god ever, and all the Middle Kingdom pharaohs made temples for him and devoted all of their surplus to his glory. The Middle Kingdom also developed an interest in conquering, specifically the new pharaoh's homeland of Nubia, and they developed a side interest in getting conquered, specifically by Semitic peoples from the Levant.

They were able to conquer much of Egypt using superior military technology like bronze weapons and compound bows, and chariots of fire. What? They were just regular chariots? STAN, WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS KILLING MY DREAMS?! One group, the Hyksos, were able to conquer all of Egypt, but rather than like destroying the Egyptian culture, they just relaxed like the Nile and assimilated into the Egyptians.

And the Egyptians adopted their military technology. And then the Egyptians destroyed the Hyksos and expelled them from Egypt. And then, by 1550 BCE, there was again an Egyptian pharaoh, Ahmosis... whose name only sounds like an STD.

Anyway, after all this conquering and being conquered, Egypt eventually emerged from its geographically imposed isolationism and, can we cue the New Kingdom Graphic please? There it is! New Kingdom Egypt continued this military expansion but it looked more like an Empire, particularly when they headed south and took over land in an attempt to find gold and slaves.

Probably the most expansive of the New Kingdom pharaohs was Hatshepsut, a woman who ruled Egypt for about 22 years, and who expanded Egypt not through military might, but through trade. But most New Kingdom pharaohs, being dudes, focused on military expansion, which brought Egypt into conflicts with the Assyrians, who you'll remember from last week, and then the Persians, and then Alexander the Great, and finally, the Romans.

On the whole, Egypt probably would've been better off enjoying its geographical isolation and not trying to conquer new territory, but all of Egypt's friends had jumped off a bridge, so... One last thing about the New Kingdom. There was this crazy New Kingdom Pharaoh named Akhenaten, who tried to invent a new god for Egypt, Aten.

Akhenaten was kind of the Kim Jong-Il of Ancient Egypt, like he had this feared police force and this big cult of personality. And also he was a nut job. Anyway, after his death he was replaced by his wife, and then a daughter and then a son, Tutankaten, who turned his back on the weird god Aten and changed his name to Tutankhamen.

And that is about all King Tut did before he died, probably around the age of 17. Honestly, the only reason King Tut is famous is that most Pharaohs had their graves robbed by ancient people; and King Tut had his grave robbed by 20th-century British people. Which brings us to the Open Letter.

**=====Open Letter (9:19)=====**

An Open Letter to King Tut. Oh, but first we gotta find out what Stan left for me in the Secret Compartment. It's a pen. [clicks pen] AAHHHH!! It's a shock pen! Stan?! That's a terrible, terrible gift for the secret compartment.

Dear King Tut, I know that as Pharaohs' lives go, yours was pretty poor. First, you had to marry your sister, which... hopefully you weren't that psyched about, plus you had a cleft palette and probably scoliosis. Plus, you died before really reaching adulthood.

But dude, you have had the best afterlife ever. Since your body was discovered in 1922, you've become probably the most famous ancient person. There have been lots of books about you; scholars have devoted their lives to you - dude, we're so obsessed with you that we used this fancy new technology to scan your body and establish that you probably died of an infected broken leg and/or malaria.

So you've inspired such seminal works of art as the Discovery Kids series Tutenstein, which my son forces me to watch. Your relics have been to six continents! So it all works out in the end, man. Well, I mean, you're still dead. So that kinda sucks.

Best wishes,
John Green.

**=====Conclusion (10:27)=====**

King Tut leads us nicely to the really crucial thing about Egyptian culture. Because King Tut lived right around the same time as the Pyramids, right? Wrong. Remember, the Pyramids were built around 2500 BCE during the Old Kingdom. King Tut died in 1322 BCE, 1200 years later! That's five and a half Americas.

But because Egypt was so similar for so long, it all tends to blend together when we imagine it. Ancient Egypt lasted 1000 years longer than Christianity has been around, and about 800 years longer than that other super-long-lived civilization, China.

So there was an entire culture that lasted longer than Western Civilization has existed, and it had run its course before "the West" was even born. Next week, we'll look at the... Persians and the Greeks. I'll see you then.

**=====Credits (11:13)=====**

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, the show is written by Raoul Meyer - my high school history teacher - and myself, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week's phrase of the week was "Male Models." You can take your guess at this week's phrase of the week in comments and also suggest future phrases of the week. And if you have any questions about today's video, leave them in comments and our team of semi-professional quasi-historians will endeavor to answer them as best we can.

Thanks for watching and as we say in my hometown: **Don't Forget To Be Awesome.**