

# MR. DOWLING'S STUDY SHEET ON ANCIENT EGYPT

## The Gift of the Nile

Like a giant snake, the Nile River slithers through some of the driest desert on earth to isolate a narrow green valley. The Nile was also home to one of the earliest civilizations in history. Today, more than seventy million people live along the banks of the Nile, the world's longest river. The Nile was also home to one of the earliest civilizations in history.

Ancient Egypt could not have existed without the great river. Every year, the snow in the mountains of East Africa melts, sending a torrent of water that overflows the banks of the Nile. The river picks up bits of soil and plant life called silt. The silt is dropped on the banks of the Nile as the flood recedes, and creates excellent topsoil that provides two or three crops every year. The ancient Greeks spoke with envy when they referred to Egypt as "the Gift of the Nile."

## Ancient Egypt was protected from invaders by natural borders

The boundaries of many of the western United States are man-made boundaries. This is easy to see when looking at a map because the lines are straight. The eastern states tend to be bounded by rivers, lakes, or mountain ranges. These are called natural boundaries.

- The land beyond the Nile River Valley is a desert. A desert is a region that receives less than ten inches of precipitation in a typical year. It is difficult to march an army and the provisions they need across a desert.
- There are six large waterfalls called cataracts along the Nile River south of the ancient civilization. The cataracts made it difficult for navies to invade Egypt from the south.
- Not many people ventured into the sea before 1500BC, so the Mediterranean Sea formed a natural border in ancient times. Egypt was not invaded by the sea until a French navy led by Napoleon Bonaparte invaded in 1798.

Invaders from Persia (modern Iran), Greece, Turkey, and Rome conquered Egypt, but the natural borders made it possible for the Nile River Valley to develop without constant fear of attack.



The Rosetta Stone

## The Rosetta Stone

The ancient Egyptians were a great mystery to scientists until they deciphered hieroglyphics, the writing of the ancient people. Egypt was mentioned in the Bible, but outsiders didn't learn much about Egyptian history until a troop of French soldiers found a dark grey-pinkish granite stone near the city of Egyptian city Rosetta in 1799.

The Rosetta Stone was less than four feet tall and 2 ½ feet wide. It was inscribed with laws made in 196BC. The laws were written in three scripts so that the priests, government officials, and rulers of Egypt could read what it said. The first script was ancient Hieroglyphic, which was the script used for important or religious documents. The second was the script used by the Egyptian people at that time and the third was Greek, which was the language of the rulers of Egypt at that time.

A French scholar named Jean Champollion translated the hieroglyphic writing in 1824. By working out what some hieroglyphs stood for, he could make educated guesses about what the others represented.

Champollion concluded that hieroglyphics had originally been pictographs, but they stood for sounds in later times.

Today the term Rosetta Stone is used as a metaphor that refers to anything that is a key to figuring out a difficult problem.



Jean Champollion

## The Land of the Dead

We know a great deal more about Egyptian afterlife than we do about their culture. The Egyptians wrote on sheets made from stalks of papyrus. The papyrus disintegrated over time in the humid climate. Time also destroyed the mud brick homes of the Egyptians. What we do know about ancient Egypt comes mainly from their great pyramids. The pyramids were stone structures built as tombs and monuments to their pharaohs.

The Egyptians often buried their dead in dry sand with their most treasured possessions. They believed that as long as the body existed, a person continued to live in the afterlife. Children were buried with their toys so that they could play in the afterlife. The Egyptians were very careful to say only good things about the dead. The Egyptians believed their leader, the pharaoh, was their link to the afterlife, so by about 3300BC, they began to take particular care in preserving the pharaoh's bodies as mummies.

Egyptian mummification took about 70 days and was an expensive process that not all families could afford. The priests who preserved the mummies were required to perform special rituals or ceremonies during the process. The body was cut on the side to remove the intestines, liver, stomach, and lungs. The organs were then wrapped in linen and stored in jars. The Egyptians did not understand the importance of the brain. Priests removed it by inserting a special hook through the nostrils to the skull. The hook was swished around, turning the brain to liquid. The brain was then poured out of the skull through the nose.

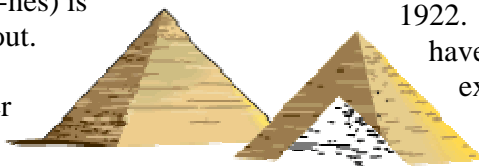
The body was stuffed for about forty days to drain any fluids. When the stuffing was removed, the body was very dry, and smaller than in life. It was again stuffed with packing and covered in jewels. The body was then wrapped in about twenty layers of linen.

Some ancient Egyptians would simply be mummified and laid in a simple tomb or on a ledge in a tomb. The pharaoh, however, would be interred in a set of nesting mummy cases and elaborate stone coffins called sarcophagi. When a pharaoh's mummy was complete, a priest would touch the mouth of the mummy stick so that the pharaoh could breathe and speak in the afterlife.

## The Pharaoh

The Egyptians believed their pharaoh was both a god and a monarch. A monarch is a king or a queen. Egypt was ruled by many pharaohs, but a few stand out.

Menes (pronounced MEE-nes) is the first pharaoh we know about. Menes united two kingdoms, called Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt, and established what



we now call the "Old Kingdom" about 3100BC. Menes' tomb wasn't discovered until 1897. Legend says that Menes ruled Egypt for 62 years and was killed by a hippopotamus.

Royal families often intermarried because they did not want to produce children with common people.

This was the case for Thutmose II, an Egyptian pharaoh who lived around 1500BC. Thutmose II married his half-sister Hatshepsut. Thutmose II had a son, Thutmose III, by a minor wife. When Thutmose II died his son, Thutmose III became pharaoh. However, Hatshepsut was appointed regent because of the boy's young age. A regent is someone who rules for a monarch if they are too young to rule. Hatshepsut and Thutmose III ruled jointly until Hatshepsut declared herself to be pharaoh. Dressed in men's attire, Hatshepsut administered the affairs of the nation. Hatshepsut disappeared shortly after Thutmose III led a revolt to reclaim the throne. Thutmose then destroyed Hatshepsut's shrines and statues.

Akhenaton was a monotheistic pharaoh who ruled with his queen, Nefertiti from 1352BC to 1336BC. They worshipped Aton, a god of the sun. Akhenaton and Nefertiti forbade their subjects to worship of any other gods. They built great statues to Aton and ordered that statues honoring any other god be destroyed. Most Egyptians did not take the faith of their leaders, and after their death, statues of Aton were destroyed.

Tutankhamen became pharaoh shortly after Akhenaton's death. He was only nine years old, but was married to the daughter of Akhenaton and Nefertiti. The "boy king" never became a "man king" because he died of a head injury only nine years into his rule. Most of the treasures of the pyramids were plundered, but by accident Tutankhamen's tomb remained intact because it was buried by rock chips dumped from the cutting of a tomb of a later pharaoh. The tomb lay hidden for more than three thousand years until British archaeologist Howard Carter discovered it in

1922. Today the treasures of Tutankhamen's have been exhibited around the world. An exhibit is currently in the United States.

Mr. Dowling's class viewed the exhibit in Ft. Lauderdale in April, 2006.

