

3. The Old Kingdom.

Egyptian history begins with the invention of writing, about the time of the first dynasty. The hieroglyphic system is soon quite fully developed, so it would seem likely that its impetus came from knowledge of a written system (called cuneiform) which had had a longer and slower development in Mesopotamia. The Egyptian system developed along very different lines from those in Mesopotamia.

The Old Kingdom is the title given to the first time of great royal power (about 2700 to 2200 B.C.), running from dynasties three to six. At this period the pharaohs were very dictatorial, and were able to gather hundreds of thousands of people each year during the season when the Nile overflowed its banks and made agricultural work impossible, and to compel them to work energetically for long periods, in order to build those tremendous burial monuments called the pyramids. During this time the religion glorified the sun god, but there were many subordinate deities. Eventually the power of the pharaoh crumbled and there was a time of disorganization, during the latter part of which some of the great classics of Egyptian literature were written.

4. The Middle Kingdom.

A new time of great power began when the kings of a region in the south, centering around the town later known as Thebes, and worshipping a local god called Amun (formerly written Amen or Amon), became supreme over all of Egypt, and established their power in the delta. This was the period of the Twelfth Dynasty (about 1991 to 1786 B.C.). These kings put foreign lands under tribute, and directed a high type of civilization, though without quite the same monarchical supremacy as that of either the Old Kingdom or the later New Kingdom. This is the classical time of Egyptian literature. It ends with the coming from Asia of a foreign group that possessed a new weapon, that of horse-drawn chariots which