**The Nile Valley - Egyptian Civilization**

**Geography**

Since most of Egypt is a desert, most people settled along the Nile River. The earliest civilization in Egypt arose about 5,000 years ago. The Nile River provide water for drinking and for irrigation of crops. The warm climate was suitable for agriculture. Each fall, the flood waters of the Nile deposited rich soil on the land. The river also served as a highway for travel. The surrounding desert kept most attackers away. The villages around the Nile had more contact and less conflict than did the isolated Sumerian city-states. As the population increased, the Egyptian villages merged into cities. The cities grew into two kingdoms - Upper Egypt in the south and Lower Egypt in the north.

**Social Structure**

The Egyptian society was divided into classes. The highest class consisted of the pharaoh (Egyptian ruler) and his family. Next were the priests and nobles. These people lived in luxurious houses surrounded by gardens. Wealth farmers, merchants, and skilled workers enjoyed comfortable middle-class lives. Occupying the next to lowest place in society were the hard-working peasants. Theirs was the largest class. These people had to pay heavy taxes, sometimes as much as 20 percent of their harvest. The lowest class consisted of slaves. They were forced to work for the government, digging stones for the state monument of tending to temple farms. Women had a higher status in Egyptian society than in any other ancient civilization. Women could own property, enter business deals, and obtain a divorce.

**Political System**

The Egyptian ruler was the pharaoh. Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was not the agent of a god, but the god figure himself. When a pharaoh died, he was buried in majestic pyramid surrounded by possessions for use in afterlife. After the death of a pharaoh, power usually passed to another member of the family. These ruling families were called dynasties. Egyptians believed that the gods were concerned about their well-being. Consequently, the pharaoh's main duty was to care for his people. His subjects expected his commands to be wise and just. The pharaohs also kept powerful armies to protect Egypt from enemies. Some pharaohs, such as Thutmose III and Ramses II used armies to conquer more land. A large group of priests, nobles, and governors helped the pharaoh intercept religious questions, make decisions about the ownership of land, collect taxes, and determine how the tax money should be spent.

**Economy**

The economies of the early river valley civilizations were all primarily based on agriculture. If crops failed for an extended period of time, the civilizations collapsed. The surpluses of food made possible by faming allowed some people to specialize or do only one kind of work. Some people devoted all their time to making such goods as cloth, pottery, and jewelry. Others became merchants and traded surplus food and manufactured goods for items not available in their area. Eventually, craftwork and trade became as important as agriculture.

**Religion**

The polytheistic Egyptians believed in many gods and goddesses. The sun god Amon-Re was the chief god. Osiris was the god of the Nile. Osiris controlled the annual flood that made the land fertile. The Egyptians also believed in a host of other gods who served specific functions.

Egyptians also believed that each person had a ka, or special life force that could not be destroyed. At death, ka deserted the body. It could, however, return. Therefore, Egyptian priests preserved corpses. They mummified them by treating them with special herbs and oils and wrapping them in linen cloth. They then placed the mummies in tombs filled with the dead person's belongings. Egyptians hoped that when the ka returned it would stay in its well-furnished tomb and not haunt the living. So great was the skill of the priests that many mummies remained whole through thousands of years.

**Contributions**

The Egyptians made many advances in science and art. The process of mummification helped them learn much about the human body, allowing them to diagnose many illnesses and perform surgery. Egyptians also developed a calendar very similar to the one we use today. It divided the year into 12 months of 30 days each. Five feasts were added to the end of the year to make 365 days.

Mathematicians created a number system based on ten and developed a system of geometry. Geometry was important for pyramid, temple, and monument builders, all of which have survived thousands of years. Egyptians also created a system of writing called hieroglyphics. The hieroglyphics were first carved on stone and later the Egyptians invented a method of making paper from papyrus plants. Scholars learned how to read Egyptian writing from a slab of rock that had writing engrave on it. Because it was found near an Egyptian town called Rosetta, the rock is called the Rosetta Stone.