THE NEW KINGDOM (1550–1075 B.C.E.)

During the New Kingdom, Egyptian civilization reached the height of its magnificence and power. Although established forms of religious, economic, cultural, and political life continued, the New Kingdom also marked a radical departure in Egyptian history and culture. The dynamism of the New Kingdom—particularly its focus on imperialism and militarism—changed the very fabric of Egyptian life.

PHARAONIC RULE IN THE EIGHTEENTH DYNASTY

The Eighteenth Dynasty ruled Egypt for more than two and a half centuries. Striking developments took place during this period. Most important, we witness the rise of a new type of nobility in Egyptian society, an aristocracy of military commanders and leaders whose wealth was acquired through war: not just plunder but also crown lands (and the slaves to work them) received from the pharaoh as rewards for their service.

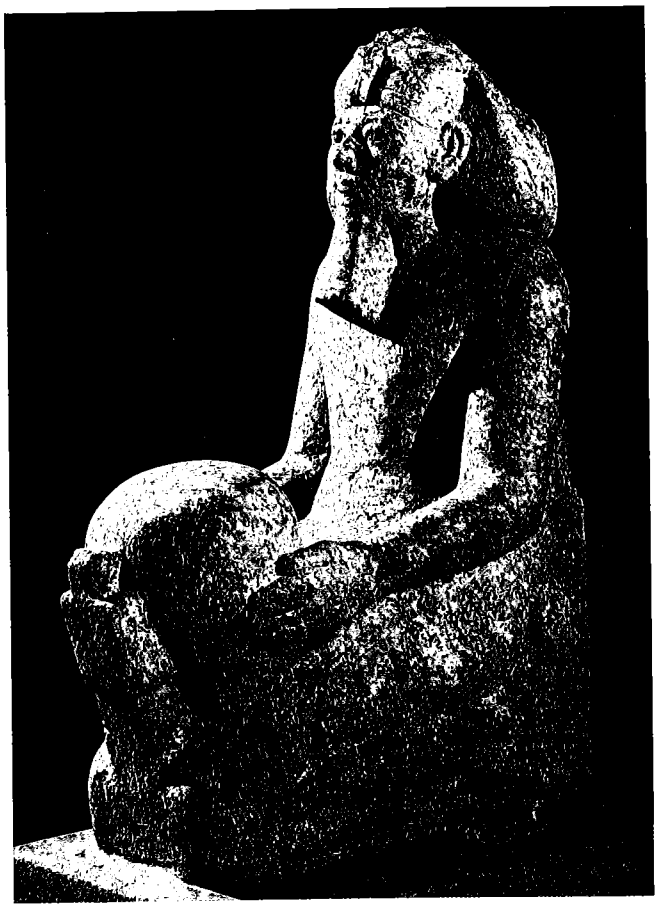
The Eighteenth Dynasty was forged in battle. Ahmose (*AH-mohs*) himself won fame as the man who expelled the Hyksos and reunited Egypt. Soon thereafter, Ahmose and his heirs turned their attention south, toward Nubia. By this time, gold had become the standard for Near Eastern commerce and finance. If Egypt was to prosper in this world, it needed to control the rich Nubian gold mines. Under Thutmose I (c. 1504–1492 B.C.E.), the Egyptians also penetrated to the northeast, driving deep into Palestine and Syria. This great pharaoh claimed to rule the land from beyond the Fourth Cataract in the south to the banks of the Euphrates in the north. No previous pharaoh had ever held sway over so much territory. Nor was his success merely fleeting. In the north, the Egyptians would sustain a serious military presence in the Middle and Near East for the next 400 years. In the south, pharaohs undertook massive temple and statuary building projects in the Sudan more than a century after Thutmose's death.

New Kingdom pharaohs pursued an ambitious strategy of defense through offense. The embarrassment of Hyksos domination translated itself into a steely determination to prevent such an episode from occurring ever again, not by preparing for the day when more invaders might arrive but by actively projecting Egyptian strength into regions from which danger might come. The Egyptians also learned something about battle tactics from the Hyksos, employing the horse-drawn battle chariots the Hyksos had used against them to devastating effect against their new enemies.

QUEEN HATSHEPSUT AND THUTMOSE III

Military activity peaked during the fifteenth century, in the wake of what could have been a crisis for the Eighteenth Dynasty. In 1479 B.C.E., Thutmose II died young, leaving a youth as his heir, the future Thutmose III. In the past, such incidents often led to instability and even changes of dynasty. On this occasion, however, family politics and a remarkable personality served as a force for cohesion and continuity. It was customary in the New Kingdom for the pharaoh—himself a manifestation of a god—to marry as his official "queen" only someone worthy of such a union. This meant the daughter of the previous pharaoh, and thus a sister or half-sister of the new pharaoh. Such brother–sister unions do not appear to have been the routine way to produce heirs: pharaohs also had a vast harem of subsidiary wives and concubines with whom to procreate. Such was the case with Thutmose II, whose queen was his sister Hatshepsut (*hahb-SHEHP-soot*), but whose son and heir had been borne to him by another wife.

On the death of Thutmose II, Hatshepsut became regent for her stepson/nephew Thutmose III, who was still a small child when his father died. It was common practice during the New Kingdom for a widowed queen to act as regent in such cases, a reflection of the relatively high status that Egyptian women generally enjoyed compared with women in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. What is remarkable in Hatshepsut's case, however, is that within a few years of becoming regent, she declared herself to be pharaoh in her own right and began to portray herself in pictures and statuary with the masculine figure and false beard characteristic of male pharaohs (see illustration on p. 56). She did not pretend to be a man—inscriptions on her statues and portraits almost always indicate her true sex—nor did she usurp the throne from Thutmose III, who continued to be described as her co-ruler. But during the twenty years that she and Thutmose III reigned together, she was clearly the ruling force within the government, and it was her statecraft that proved crucial to the continuing success of the Eighteenth Dynasty and of Egypt. Several successful military campaigns were recorded under her name, and the arts flourished, setting standards that Egyptian craftsmen would emulate for a thousand years. She is best remembered, however, for her spectacular mortuary temple, still one



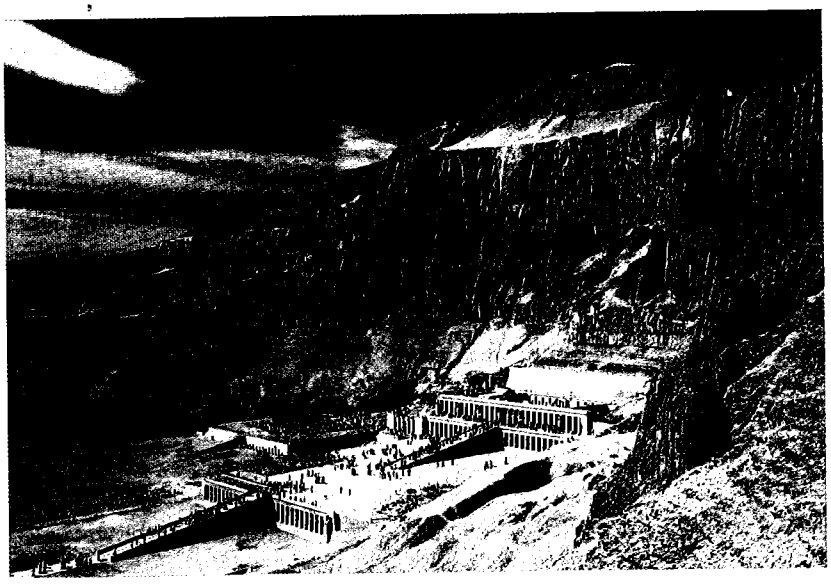
Hatshepsut as Pharaoh, c. 1460 B.C.E. Notice her masculine figure and ceremonial beard.

of the wonders of ancient Egyptian architecture, where both she and her father, Thutmose I, were ultimately buried. Thereafter, few New Kingdom pharaohs advertised so openly their burial site (see illustration at right). Instead, it became customary for pharaohs to be buried in the famous Valley of the Kings near Thebes—a remote location where, it was hoped, their tombs would remain hidden and thus safe from robbers.

Thutmose III remained in Hatshepsut's shadow until her death in 1458 B.C.E. Thereafter, he ruled alone until his own death some thirty years later. In the final decade of his rule, he began to deface Hatshepsut's monuments and to remove her name from inscriptions, to create the impression that he had always ruled alone. But despite his ingratitude, Thutmose III was a great pharaoh. He launched a total of seventeen military campaigns, penetrating deep into Palestine and capturing the strategic town of Megiddo (Armageddon). He followed up that famous victory by seizing vital port towns along the Syrian coast. His son Amenhotep II (c. 1428–1400 B.C.E.) continued his father's Syrian conquests, crossing the Orontes River and extending Egyptian control into the Syrian interior.

These campaigns were intended not only to augment Egyptian strength but also to undermine the economic and military might of the Kingdom of Mitanni. In this they were entirely successful, but to ironic effect. Mitanni was now so weakened that the Hittites were able to reassert themselves and their ambitions in Syria and Mesopotamia. The Assyrians also broke free of their vassalage to Mitanni, and would ultimately prove a far more aggressive foe to Egypt than Mitanni had ever been. At the time, however, the long-term consequences of Mitanni's demise were not apparent, and the Eighteenth Dynasty basked in the glow of its military accomplishments.

In addition to the tremendous power and wealth accrued by Thutmose III and Amenhotep *(AH-mehn-HOH-tehp)* II, the Eighteenth Dynasty also established a reputation for determination and ruthlessness. Amenhotep III (c. 1390–1352 B.C.E.), known as "The Magnificent," found therefore that he did not have to pursue military conquests equal to his grandfather's or his great-grandfather's. By and large, his task was to administer effectively the territories Egypt had already



The Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut. Unlike the pharaohs of the Old Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty pharaohs often chose to be buried in specially built mortuary temples rather than in a separate pyramid or at another gravesite. The innovative architectural style of Hatshepsut's temple, which was built into an excavated hillside and set off by rows of columns, was widely imitated by later pharaohs.

acquired and to exploit the economic and diplomatic advantages it had already won. That Amenhotep III did with skill and aplomb. The pharaoh received tribute from far and wide, including a land called Keftiu (usually identified with the biblical Caphtor, and most likely the island of Crete). He concluded treaties with Mitanni and received at least two Mitannian princesses into his harem. So long as Amenhotep III remained vigilant and tended to his diplomatic interests, he had no need to do more than enjoy the benefits of his predecessors' endeavors.

RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND RELIGIOUS CHALLENGE

The great conquests of the Eighteenth Dynasty brought mind-boggling amounts of spoil to Egypt. Much of this wealth went to the personal glorification of the pharaoh through grand temples, tombs, and other monuments and the ubiquitous royal stelae (inscribed stone monuments) that provide us with so much historical information. Another significant portion of the booty went to the military aristocracy that made such conquests possible. But vast quantities of wealth still remained, which went to propitiate the gods with offerings of thanks for Egypt's bountiful success. Temples throughout Egypt enjoyed the profits of conquest, and as the temples became wealthy and powerful, so too did their priests. But no temple complex made out quite so well as that dedicated to Amon in Thebes.

THE TEMPLE OF AMON

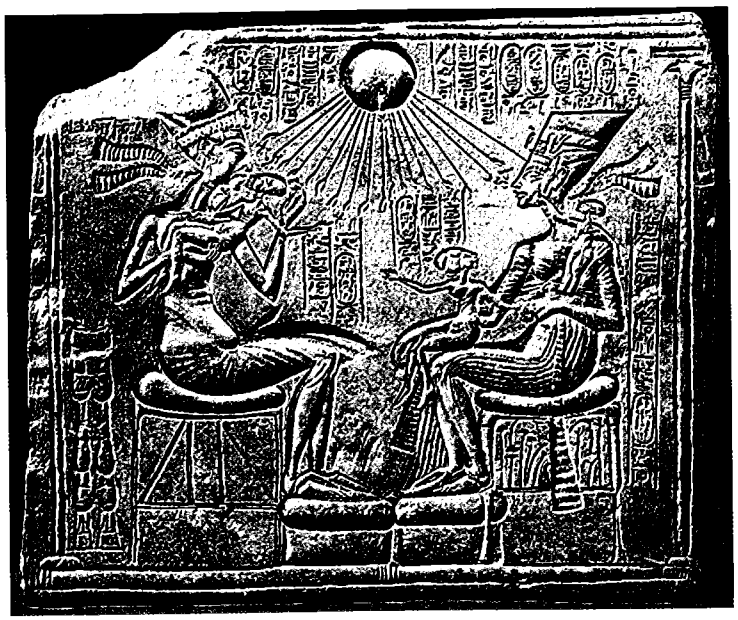
Thebes was the capital of the Eighteenth Dynasty; as the city's patron deity, Amon therefore played an important role in the dynasty's own self-image. But Amon was more than just a local god. He had grown in stature and popularity throughout Middle Kingdom Egypt. Increasingly he was identified or incorporated with the sun god, Ra (thus the common New Kingdom formulation Amon-Ra). By 1550 B.C.E., the Amon-Ra godhead had become something like an Egyptian national god, around whom the Thebes-based Eighteenth Dynasty rallied Egypt against the Hyksos. The dynasty therefore had much reason for gratitude to Amon, whose support had been crucial in their efforts to reunite Egypt.

The favor shown to the priesthood of Amon at Thebes, coupled with the tremendous wealth deposited there, made the priests of Amon a formidable political and economic force. Indeed, by the end of Amenhotep III's reign, the priesthood of Amon enjoyed political clout surpassing even that of the officer class, and the priests themselves had become influential persons at the pharaoh's court. The dynasty's prestige was completely intertwined with that of Amon; but it was starting to be unclear whose was the controlling voice in this relationship.

THE REIGN OF AKHENATEN (1352–1336 B.C.E.)

All these factors came to a fateful intersection in one of history's most intriguing figures. On the death of Amenhotep III, his son succeeded him as Amenhotep IV. Amenhotep IV showed an early inclination toward sun-god worship, as distinct from worship of Amon: Amenhotep's earliest inscriptions exalt Ra, not as an aspect of Amon but as a discrete divinity, visibly manifest in the light of the sun's rays. In his dedications to Ra, Amenhotep laid aside the traditional depiction of a falcon (or a falcon-headed man), replacing it with the *Aten*, the sun

The Temple of Amon at Karnak. This massive temple, just outside Thebes, testifies to the Eighteenth Dynasty's support for the god Amon and his priests.



Akhenaten, His Wife Nefertiti, and Their Children. The Aten is depicted here as a sun disk, raining down power on the royal family.

disk itself, its rays of light reaching toward earth. But soon the new pharaoh went much farther. He changed his name from Amenhotep ("Amon Is Pleased") to Akhenaten (*AH-keh-NAH-ton*; "He Who Is Profitable to the Aten"). As Akhenaten, he built a new capital halfway between Memphis in the north and Thebes in the south, calling it Akhetaten ("The Horizon of the Aten"), the modern site of el-Amarna. The short-lived but quite distinctive culture of Akhenaten's reign is therefore known as the Amarna Period.

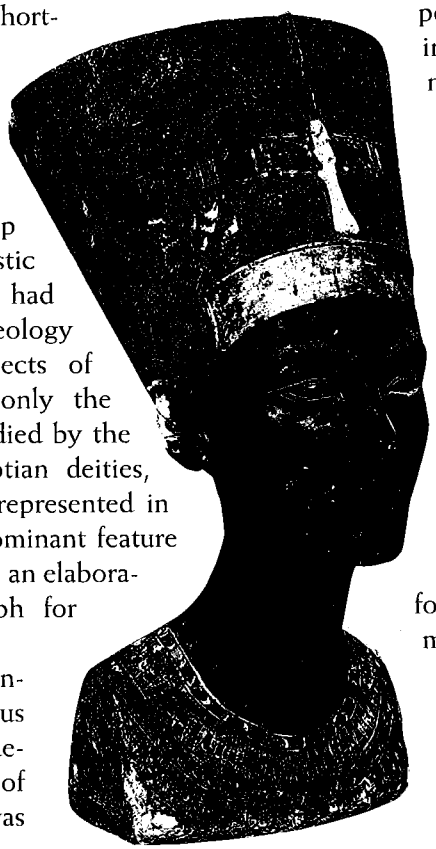
Akhenaten introduced a variety of innovations into Egyptian religion and culture. Aten worship was more stringently monotheistic than the evolving view of Amon had been. Whereas Theban Amon theology recognized other gods as aspects of Amon, Akhenaten recognized only the life-giving power of light, embodied by the Aten. Unlike the ancient Egyptian deities, Aten could not be captured or represented in art. The image of the Aten, a dominant feature of Amarna-Period art, is therefore an elaboration of the Egyptian hieroglyph for "light."

Life and its affirmation were central aspects of Akhenaten's religious revolution. The Aten was often depicted with a hand at the end of each ray of light. In each hand was the *ankh*, the Egyptian hieroglyph for "life." Akhenaten also had himself portrayed in curious fashion, although it is unclear whether the uniqueness of this representation was due to ideology or to features of his own anatomy. In a complete departure from the confident virility of his ancestors, Akhenaten is always shown with an elongated head and limbs, an exaggerated nose, and exceptionally full lips. His eyes are catlike, and the pronounced protrusion of his belly is somewhat reminiscent of female fertility figurines. The overall effect is of a certain androgyny whose significance is unclear. Akhenaten was clearly a family man and had himself pictured as the most human of pharaohs, enjoying the company of his beautiful queen, Nefertiti, as they played with their children. Indeed, a palpable sense of humanity—an almost "common" touch compared with earlier pharaonic art—pervades the Amarna Period.

Great controversy still surrounds Akhenaten's motives for this religious and cultural revolution. Some see him as the world's first revolutionary intellectual, who applied imaginative force and exceptional insight to break the bonds of tradition. Others see him as a reactionary, troubled by the absorption of Ra into Amon and attempting to reassert the traditional worship of the sun. Others see him as a cagey politician, who sought to undermine the influence of Amon's priests by instituting a new religious regime.

These various explanations are not mutually exclusive. Politics and religion were inextricably intertwined in the ancient Near East, as they would be in Greece and Rome also. His own dynasty's particular identification with Amon guaranteed, however, that Akhenaten's religious revolution would also be politically revolutionary, because it would require that the legitimacy of his dynasty be reestablished on new foundations.

But despite the tremendous energy Akhenaten expended in trying to achieve this revolution, most Egyptians did not follow him. Traditional Egyptian religion may seem bewilderingly complex to us, but



Nefertiti. The famous portrait bust executed in Akhenaten's studios at el-Amarna.

AKHENATEN, THE HEBREWS, AND MONOTHEISM

One of the great literary monuments of Akhenaten's religious revolution was his "Hymn to the Aten," extolling the life-affirming virtues of the god he sought to place atop the Egyptian religious system. Although Akhenaten's experiment failed in Egypt, it may have played a significant role in shaping the religious traditions of other societies throughout the Levant, including the ancient Hebrews.

Hymn to the Aten

You appear beautifully on the horizon of the heavens, living Aten, the beginning of life! When you arise on the eastern horizon, you have filled every land with your beauty. You are gracious, great, glistening, and high over every land; your rays encompass the lands to the limit of all that you have made. . . . When you set in the western horizon, the land is in darkness, in the manner of death. They sleep in a room, with heads wrapped up, nor sees one eye the other. All their goods which are under their heads might be stolen, but they would not perceive it. . . .

Creator of seed in women, you who makes fluid into man, who maintains the son in the womb of his mother, who soothes him with that which stills his weeping, you nurse even in the womb, who gives breath to sustain all that he has made! . . . How manifold it is, that which you have made! They are hidden from the face of man. O sole god, like whom there is no other! You created the world according to your desire, while you were alone: all men, cattle, and wild beasts, whatever is on earth, going upon its feet, and what is on high, flying with its wings. . . .

The world came into being by your hand, according to how you have made them. When you have risen they live, when you set they die. You are lifetime itself, for one lives only through you.

James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Bible,* 3rd rev. ed. with supplement (based on). (Princeton, N.J., 1969), pp. 370–371

Psalm 104

Bless the Lord, O my soul. . . . You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent. . . . You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee. . . . You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. . . . These all look to you to give them food in due season; when you give them to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away your breath they die.

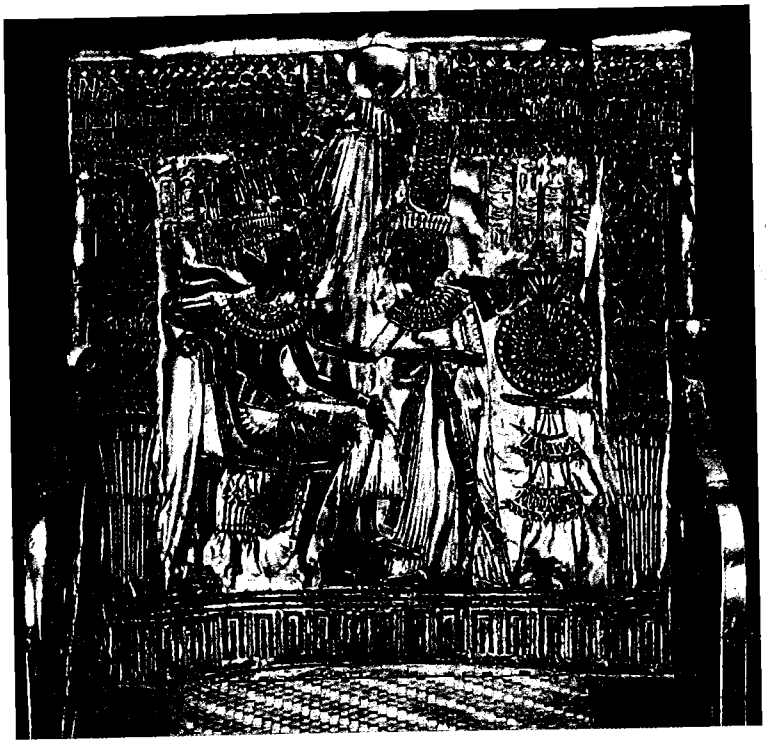
The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Oxford, 1994).

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. How does the "Hymn to the Aten" express monotheism? Why would a pharaoh, already acknowledged as divine, attempt a religious revolution? Why did he fail?
2. The praise of the greatness of God in Psalm 104 suggests an order in Creation. How does this idea of order differ from the *ma'at* of the Egyptians? How does the monotheism of the Hebrews differ from that of Akhenaten? Why did polytheism emerge before monotheism?

Egyptians apparently preferred it to the remote, benevolent but impersonal god their pharaoh was offering them. The powerful priesthood of Amon also put up strenuous resistance to Akhenaten's religious innovations. To make matters worse, Akhenaten seems also to have been largely uninterested in military affairs. His exertions on behalf of his new god may even have encouraged him to neglect Egypt's interests abroad. The revolts that followed cost him the support of his military nobility. Akhenaten's revolution failed.

His failure was the harbinger of the Eighteenth Dynasty's decline. He was ultimately succeeded by Tutankhaten, who changed his name to Tutankhamon (the famous King Tut) to reflect his rejection of Akhenaten's heresies and the restoration of the god Amon and his priesthood. The new capital city of Akhetaten was abandoned and its memory cursed; its neglect thereafter is largely responsible for its high state of preservation today. Akhenaten, meanwhile, was remembered only as "Akhetaten's heretic." His monuments were destroyed throughout the land. But the damage had been done. Egypt's position in the wider world had eroded at an astonishing rate since the outset of Akhenaten's reign, and his heir was a sickly teenager. After the early death of the boy king, confusion ensued until an important military commander named Horemheb assumed the throne in 1323 B.C.E. Horemheb maintained stability for nearly three decades but had no heir. He passed his position to another general, Rameses I, the founder of the Nineteenth Dynasty, which would restore Egypt to glory in the Near East.



Throne of "King Tut." Dating from about 1330 B.C.E., this relief in gold and silver is part of the back of the young pharaoh's throne. The relaxed lounging position of the pharaoh's right arm is typical of the stylistic informality of the period.

The International System of the Late Bronze Age

What were the principal features of the Late Bronze Age international system?

The fates of many nations after 1500 B.C.E., including Egypt, are intelligible only within the wider context of international relations. For the next 300 years, the destinies of the various Near Eastern kingdoms became increasingly interwoven as an international system developed throughout the eastern and central Mediterranean.

The Late Bronze Age was an age of superpowers. As we have seen, the great pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty had transformed Egypt into a conquering state, feared and respected throughout the Near East. But the pressure they applied to the Kingdom of Mitanni allowed the emergence of a revived Hittite Empire after 1450 B.C.E. It was the Hittites who dealt Mitanni the most crushing blows, succeeding once again to the mantle of northern power in the region. The Assyrians also revived, and the Kassite kingdom of Babylonia remained a significant force in the economic and military relationships of the age. Between these imperial powers numerous smaller but important states emerged, concentrated along the coasts and river valleys of Syria but extending westward to Cyprus and the Aegean Sea.

International Diplomacy

Though warfare remained a characteristic feature of international relations, the most powerful states of the Late Bronze Age evolved a balance of power that helped stabilize trade