

HISTORY

# Glimpses of Ancient Egypt

**A**NCIENT Egypt, the land of the Pharaohs, has always been a place of great interest and enormous fascination to many. It worked as a source of great inspiration to Herodotus in the 5th century BC and still continues to fascinate the present day Egyptologists. Geographically isolated by deserts and sea, Egypt developed a unique self-contained culture that lasted for about three thousand years. Its dry climate has contributed much to the preservation of a wealth of wonders. The pyramids, no doubt are the jewels of all wonders.

Ancient Egypt consisted of the Nile valley — a long strip of land. On either side of the valley stretched vast expanses of desert. In modern Egypt, rainfall is negligible. But in antiquity, regular annual inundation that covered most of the land in the valley and in the delta, deposited rich layer of fertilizing silt. The production of cereals, vegetables and fruits, involved management of the waters of the river Nile, through creation of irrigation basins and channels. The Nile was not only the unifying feature of the country, it was

also the main source of life. Egypt, before the Pharaohs, was divided into Upper and Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt was the southern part, south of Thebes; Lower Egypt included the Nile Delta and the budding cities of Memphis and Alexandria. The settlement in Egypt originated in the south, a land of extensive green plain and forests. With the change of climate as the south was turning to a desert the population gradually moved north the fertile Nile valley.

In the year 3100 BC, Menes unified the chiefdoms with separate god and government for Upper and Lower Egypt and founded its capital between the junction of the two parts, at Memphis. He established peace and harmony through central bureaucratic governance and introduced the concept of chief god to be respected by all. Also, there was a development in the art of writing as hieroglyphic scripts came into existence. In 1822 French scholar Jean-Francois Champollion deciphered the scripts. But much of the script contains brags of achievements of bureaucrats and a very little

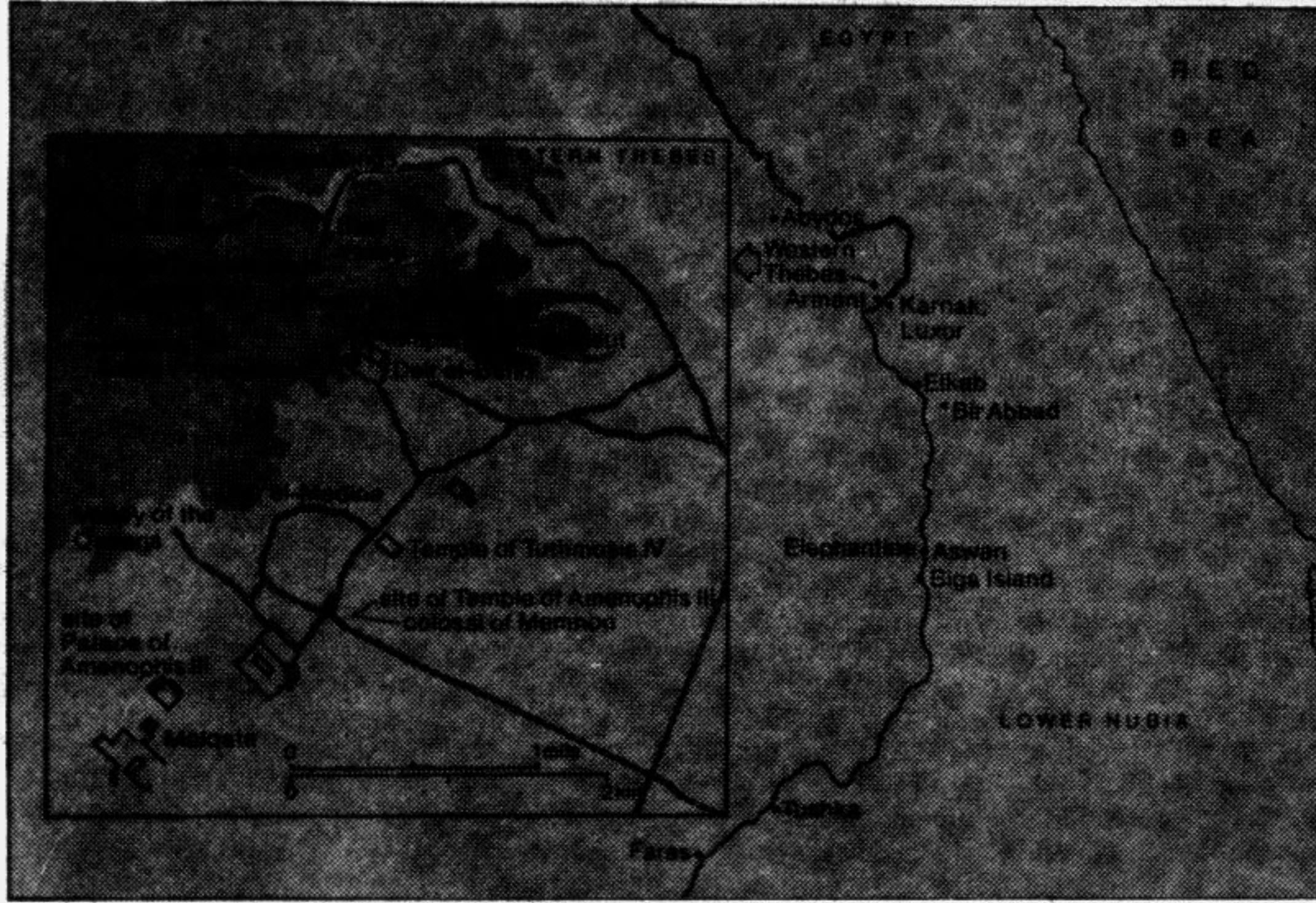
by Dewan Saad Jaglul

can be known about the social and cultural ways of life. Menes founded Dynasty I. During the following 3000 years, Egypt was destined to be ruled by 30 dynasties of Pharaohs and kings.

The beginning of the Old

Kingdom is marked by the building of first monumental pyramid, that is, the Step Pyramid, made of carefully placed large stone blocks, on the dusty Saqqara Plateau, ten miles south of Giza. This 200 ft. high edifice was the brain-child of Imhotep, the preeminent scholar of ancient

Pharaoh Khafre, a descendant from Snefru's dynasty, built the 471 feet tall 2nd great pyramid around 2520 BC at Giza. During the construction of this pyramid and its adjoining temple, workmen quarried a U-shaped pit to obtain blocks of limestone from a bedrock at a nearby



The courtyard of Amenophis III at Luxor temple with its massive papyntorm columns

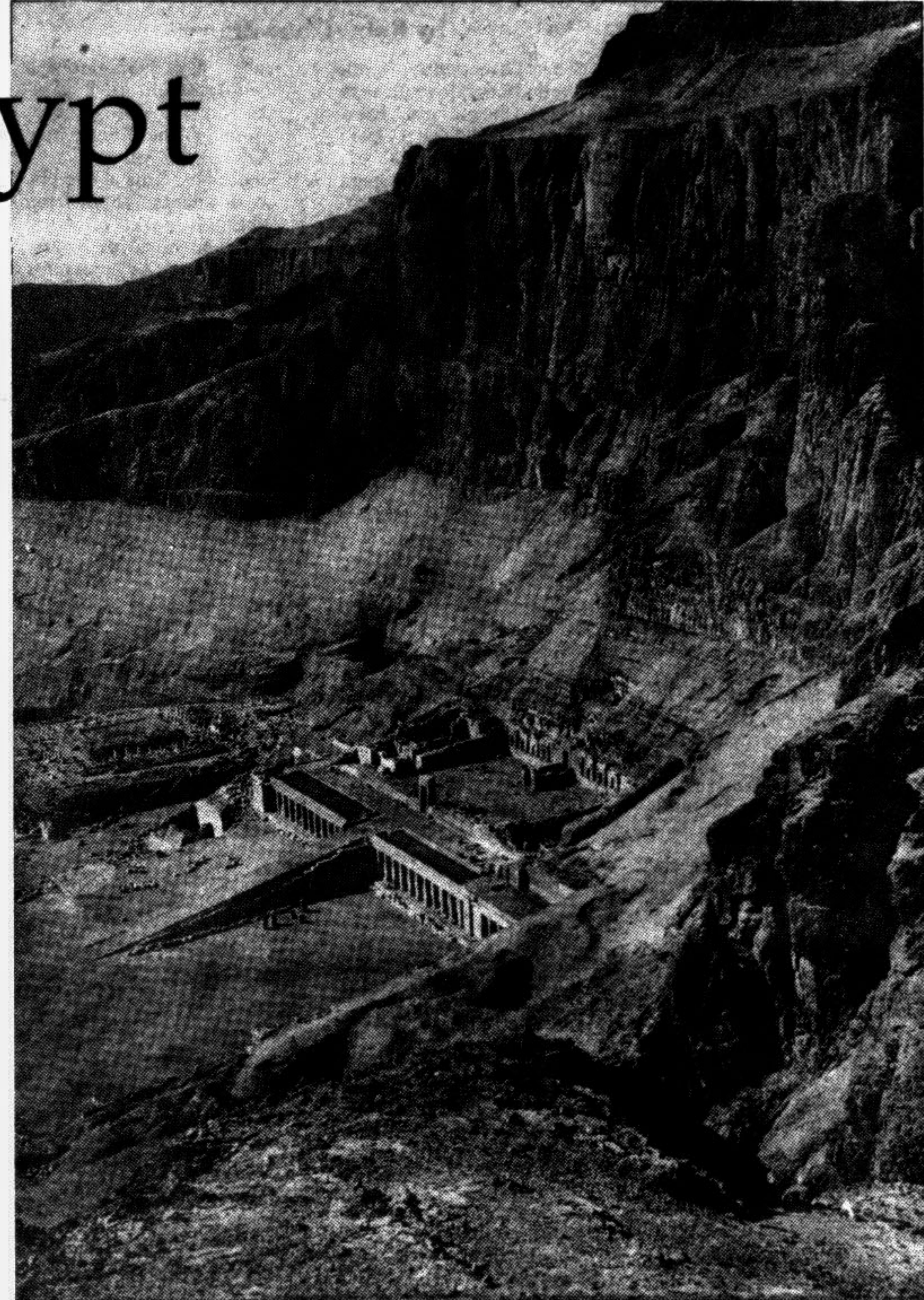
Egypt. Apart from being a royal architect of Pharaoh Djoser of the 3rd dynasty, this man also made his mark as a sculptor, a priest and a healer. Pharaoh Djoser started building this pyramid during his reign around 2630 BC as his would-be tomb.

Pharaoh Snefru abandoned the idea of Step Pyramid after having one built at Maidum. Instead, he later shifted to Dahsur and built two more pyramids with an advanced concept — creating smooth slopes in lieu of the steps. New Pharaohs often moved to a new place, perhaps to outdo the splendour of their predecessors.

Pharaoh Khufu, successor and son of Snefru, or Cheops, as the Greeks called him, built the first of the three great pyramids around 2550 BC at Giza. With a 756 feet square base and 481 feet height point it remains one of the largest buildings or monuments ever erected. This pyramid contains an estimated 2.3 million limestone blocks, most weighing 2.5 tons each.

In the process they left a core to curse out the Sphynx — "the living image of Sun god" — the 66 feet tall structure of a lion's body with two front legs and paws stretched in front as in sitting down position and Khafre's countenance curved out in place of its head. Khafre never finished this project and after his death Giza was largely abandoned except for building of the 3rd great pyramid by Pharaoh Menkuere (Khufu's grandson). However, with hundreds of years as intervals, Sphynx was destined to be excavated, reconstructed and renovated from time to time at least by a couple of illustrious Pharaohs and still later by several explorers and archaeologists as well.

A great deal about the ancient Egypt can be known from Papyrus leaves which came into use during the period of Old Kingdom. The god-like Pharaohs had a strong faith in afterlife and they believed that they would continue to exert their influence on the 1 to 1.5 million



The magnificent setting of Hatshepsut's mortuary temple looking down from the path leading over the cliff to the Valley of the Kings

subject through the monuments after their death.

While the upper class enjoyed life through a hedonistic approach the ordinary people, who formed the work force, lived in washed out huts and toiled hard to keep on with their existence. Several years ago, researcher and archaeologist Mark Lehner from the University of Chicago and Zahi Hawass, Director General of Giza Pyramids and Saqqara unearthed 600 tombs from a site near the pyramids. These are graves of workers. They discovered evidence of toil in the skeletons, their vertebrae compressed and damaged by

years of carrying heavy loads. Some were found with fingers and even limbs missing.

In ancient Egypt men wore loin-cloths while women wore shoulder-strapped dresses made of flax. This material was also used for sails and ropes. Women were involved in small-time trading of food and other goods, mostly household stuffs. Egyptians kept cattle, pigs and goats and hunting and fishing provided additional variety to their diet.

The country was rich in mineral resources — gold, copper, turquoise, semi-precious stones were also quarried. Trading expeditions

gradually set in and soon became widespread. Authority of the Pharaoh gradually weakened and priestly caste and governors gained power and autonomy. Corruption became rampant. Soon after the death of Pepi II around 2150 BC, the Old Kingdom came to an end.

The following age, which the scholars call the First Intermediate Period, remains as an enigma. Nevertheless, it has become obvious now that it was a terrible rupture, a complete collapse of the kingdom. All the pyramids were looted by organized band of thieves in broad daylight. Egypt became completely fragmented and was controlled by local monarchs.

In the year 2040 BC Mentuhotep II of XIth dynasty reunited Egypt and restored order ending 90 years of conflict. He reformed the country's administrative system removing much of the power from provincial nobility which they had acquired during the First Intermediate Period. Neighbouring Nubia was conquered. Trading expeditions were sent further up to the mystical land of Punt, which is the coastal region of present day Somalia. The practice of co-regency was instituted during the rule of XIth dynasty. By this tradition the ruling Pharaoh nominated his successor as co-regent and reigned with him for the last years of his life, thereby ensuring a smooth succession. This reorganization phase went on for more than 250 years in which two more dynasties of Pharaohs ruled Egypt and it is known as the Middle Kingdom of Egyptian history.



Painted limestone bust of Nefertiti

brought variety of other necessary items which the country lacked. However, it took another 2000 years for currency money to be used in Egypt.

By 2200 BC, after five centuries of relative prosperity and political stability, the Old Kingdom was in trouble. Its last known Pharaoh Pepi II of the 8th dynasty gained the throne as a boy and ruled for more than 90 years. Pepi's extremely long reign might have put the state into stagnation, as archaeologist Reiner Stadelmann puts it, "Exceptionally long reigns are disastrous for civilization." Moreover, during the same period due to a climatic crisis the Nile grew undependable and draught seized the land. Famine

**W**HILE it marks the past, the Day of the African Child also celebrates Africa's future. The yearly event gives governments, non-governmental organizations, religious organizations, international agencies, media, artists and intellectuals, the general public, and children — in particular — a special opportunity to focus on Africa: its beauty and diversity as a continent, its remarkable achievements in the last three decades, and the continuing needs of its children.

The Day of the African Child also serves as a forum where prevailing myths about Africa can be dispelled. The world's view of Africa is often skewed, focusing on the hardships rather than the accomplishments of the continent. Not every African child suffers from disease and malnutrition. Not every African is impoverished or illiterate.

**Africa's Commitment to its Children is Clear**

There is a new commitment to the African child, and African nations are at the center of many initiatives. To date, more than 40 African countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a UN treaty that legally binds a nation to minimum standards of well-being and protection for its children. In addition, nearly all African countries have drafted or finalized National Programmes of Action (NPAs) — customized plans for meeting specific health and development goals by the year 2000. The goals include:

- a one-third reduction in child deaths and a halving of

## Day of the African Child

In 1991, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) declared June 16 the Day of the African Child as an annual remembrance of the uprising and massacre of South Africa's Sowetan children in 1976.

- child malnutrition;
- safe water and sanitation for all families;
- basic education for all children and primary education for at least 80 per cent of children.

Increasingly, there plans have been backed by a shift in public expenditure towards human development, including basic services and poverty alleviation, and away from defense and security. Examples of progress include:

- In Tanzania and Zimbabwe, malnutrition rates have been reduced to 10 per cent;
- Benin and Burkina Faso have increased access to safe water by more than 30 per cent since 1980;

• With an accelerated effort, Egypt and Nigeria may achieve the goal of primary education for at least 80 per cent of children by the year 2000.

**Armed Conflict: A Major Challenge to Development**

Although progress is being made on many fronts to save and improve the lives of children, a number of African countries have witnessed brutal civil conflicts, where children have been the greatest victims. The recent war in Rwanda is only one example



of the atrocities experienced by the most vulnerable. It is apparent that women and children are increasingly the victims of unspeakable brutality. In conflict situations, women and children are deliberate targets of mass murder, torture, and violent assault. With this in mind, the theme of this year's Day of the African Child is children in armed conflict.

A major "call to action" that supports this theme and recognizes the need to protect and nurture Africa's children, is currently under way.

In December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly called for a Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children to be con-

ducted. Headed by Graca Machel, former first lady and minister of education and culture of Mozambique, this study addresses the many issues facing children caught in conflict — the loss of family members, homes, schools, health clinics, the breakdown of clean water supplies, the psychological trauma associated with witnessing or being forced to commit brutal acts and of being abandoned or left to die.

The Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, the first of its kind in the history of the United Nations, seeks to demonstrate to the world community the necessity of protecting and promoting the rights of children, of adopting the effective measures to do so, and of stimulating greater international action towards this end. According to Graca Machel, "This study is a catalyst to uprooting governments, international organizations, militaries, and civil society itself from the moral malaise that has inhibited clear and decisive action of behalf of children. I believe that concern for the plight of children in conflict situations can mobilize international consensus, and I view this study as a propitious opportunity to rally the global community toward effective action around the even broader universal goal of peace and development."

**UNICEF: Meeting the Needs of Innocent Victims of War**

UNICEF has made enormous strides in providing basic services for children caught in conflict. Ceasefires have been negotiated and respected among warring factions so that vaccines, medicine, warm clothing, and other basic necessities could be delivered to those in need. Major routes, cutting through war zones in places like the Sudan, have been temporarily safe from shelling and sniper

fire so that children could receive much-needed assistance. During these "Days of Tranquility" or "Corridors of Peace," UNICEF has been able to broker moments of peace on behalf of children.

In countries like Rwanda, torn apart by civil conflict, UNICEF is also responding to innocent victims of war not only with basic supplies and medicines, but with trauma counseling to help children overcome the psychological horrors of conflict. Art therapy, role playing, and extensive counseling are part of UNICEF's recovery projects. Retracing programmes are under way to reunite children — separated from their families in the fighting — with their loved ones. More than 3,000 children have been successfully reunited with their families, and more than 15,000 youngsters have been registered and photographed as part of UNICEF's new photographic identification programme.

**Building a Consensus for Children**

This year's Day of the African Child will help advance the consensus on children's rights and needs, not only in Africa, but around the world. While armed conflict may be a deterrent to progress, there are a number of positive developments taking place to address these issues and reverse the negative trends. Africa's children are resilient and full of hope. Celebrating this day means celebrating the diversity and beauty of the continent and all that its children have to offer.