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**Why Did Ancient Egypt Decline?**

The New Kingdom rose in part due to two strong military strategists, Amenhotep I, who came to power in 1545 BC, and his successor Thutmose I, who ruled from 1525 to 1490 BC. The first Amenhotep figured out how to beat the insurgent desert tribes who had caused trouble for his predecessors. Instead of chasing them around the sands, he seized the oases upon which the nomads depended for water, and built military bases there. Thutmose was an aggressive expansionist, extending the empire’s power. Egyptian soldiers advanced so far to the south that they were amazed to see rainfall, which described as “the Nile falling from the sky,” for the first time.

Compared to some of the ancient world’s brutal conquerors, the Egyptians had a comparably benign, wise approach to governing their new lands. Seized cities were considered the property of the Pharaoh, and troops spared them from sacking and burning. The Egyptians generally allowed local rulers to remain in power, but took their sons as hostages back to Egypt. Rather than being imprisoned, however, they were educated by Egyptian teachers, so that they learned to adopt the ways of the Egyptians.

So what happened to that mighty ancient empire? As Kuhrt explains, despite the rich documentation available to modern scholars, it’s difficult to pinpoint the precise reason for ancient Egypt’s gradual decline and fall. Some of the New Kingdom’s problems parallel those of modern Egypt. It had an autocratic regime, bureaucratic corruption and dramatic economic inequity. Religion was such a powerful force in Egyptian society that the priestly elite controlled 30 percent of the nation’s land, giving them a disproportionate share of the nation’s output and income.

Rulng [sic] an empire also required a larger army, and the Egyptians increasingly were forced to rely upon foreigners, mercenaries, and even captured enemy soldiers to fill out their ranks. The cost of maintaining  that military might also was a major expense for Egypt to bear, even in peacetime. Kuhrt notes that foreign soldiers recruited fro [sic] the army were rewarded with farms which were to be passed down to their descendants, as long as they also agreed to serve in the ranks. That influx led to more intensive cultivation of Egypt’s fertile soil, which put strain upon its productivity.

If a single event was the catalyst that triggered Egypt’s slide, it may have been the rise of Amenhotep IV, who ruled from 1370 to 1353 BC. Akhenaten, AKA Amenhotep IV, decided to radically alter Egyptian society and consolidate his power by changing the nation’s long-established religion. He abolished worship of the traditional pantheon and replaced it with a focus upon the sun god, Aten, which Amenhotep and his wife Nefertiti led. He also moved the empire’s capital from [**Thebes**](http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/archaeology/sites/africa/thebes.html) to a new city, [**Tell-el-Amarna**](http://www.touregypt.net/amarna.htm), to reduce the status quo’s power.

Amenhotep IV died in 1353 BC, and the changes he instituted eventually were reversed during the reign of Tutankhamun, who ascended to the throne as a child in the 1340s and was Pharaoh–at least in name–for about a decade, until his death at age 17. But the rips in the fabric of Egyptian society were never fully mended.

Over the next three centuries, the New Kingdom’s cohesiveness steadily eroded. Ramses II, who ruled the nation for nearly 70 years in the 13th Century BC, left behind at least 79 sons, leading to an extremely messy struggle to succeed him. A new dynasty, who also took the name of Ramses, eventually reestablished order for a time. But by the time of the final member, Ramses XI, who ruled from 1098 to 1069, diplomatic documents indicate that Egypt effectively had split into two states, one run from Thebes and the other from [**Tanis**](http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/tanis.htm)in the south.