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Monumental building, for example, reached a peak in about 2600–2500 BCE (Dynasty IV), when some of the most impressive pyramids were constructed at **Giza**, and then continued over the next millennia. Other art styles that emerged early in the Old Kingdom continued to influence art produced as much as two thousand years later.

Egyptian religion underwent modifications over time. Egyptians regarded the earliest pharaohs of the Old Kingdom as incarnations of the falcon god, **Horus**. Without quite giving up this claim, later pharaohs claimed to be god-descendants of **Ra** (also spelled **Re**), the sun god, or **Osiris**, the god-ruler of the underworld. Historians believe that the original pharaohs came to rule over a country with a great deal of religious diversity, with each of the small original kingdoms having its own gods and local priesthoods. One way to reconcile them all might have been to establish an authoritative account that would show them as members of a common pantheon, where one god was supreme, but all found an honored place. Another solution that worked better for the central authorities was not to worry about

primacy among the gods, but to allow each group of priests to go its own way so long as all recognized that the pharaoh himself was a god-king incarnate on earth.

Before the **Middle Kingdom**, Egyptian religion and a belief in an eternal life were concerns of the elite. Little was organized at the level of the peasants. During the Middle Kingdom, the priesthood expanded, and with the construction of temples more Egyptians began to share the experience of faith, deities, and the possibilities of an afterlife. The New Kingdom Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten, ruled about 1353–1336 BCE) even attempted to place these new developments under the auspices of a single paramount god.³⁰ A more communal religious experience was also expressed in perceptions of the afterlife. In the Old Kingdom, only the pharaoh and those entombed with him could enter the afterlife. During the **New Kingdom**, however, the famous **Book of the Dead** appeared, which described how Egyptians generally could influence their own afterlives.³¹

The pharaoh was not merely a deity; his personal physical health was intimately associated with the land, the harvest, and especially with the supply of water from the Nile flood. If the pharaoh became ill, the people expected a grim future, perhaps drought. The linkage of the health of the ruler to the fate of the people became common in much of Africa and probably arose in various forms independently of Egypt through time to justify the rise of the central authority over emerging societies. In terms of law, or **Ma'at**, people considered the pharaohs divine instruments of the universe who symbolized and carried out truth, justice, order, and harmony.

Free peasant communities formed the base of Egyptian society, although some slaves also existed. During the Old Kingdom, which had its capital at Memphis, no important social group stood between the peasantry and the royal household. The entire organization of the country, including foreign trade and irrigation works, was in the hands of the royal household. Imagine such power! Peasants either had their labor taxed or they worked on irrigation projects and monumental architecture like the pyramids. Tens of thousands of people must have been mobilized each year during the dry season to supplement or replace those freed from agriculture during the flood season to create public works on