12th Dynasty (1991 – 1783)

According to Manetho, the 12th Dynasty comprised seven kings from Thebes, who ruled for a total of 160 years in the version of Africanus, and for 245 years in the version of Eusebius. Oddly enough, this does not include the founder of the dynasty, Amenemhat I, who is added in succession to the kings of the 11th Dynasty.

In the Turin King-list, the dynasty started with Amenemhat I and consisted of 8 kings who ruled for a total of 213 years, 1 month and 17 days. All kings listed in the Turin King-list are also attested by contemporary sources and monuments.

The circumstances into which the 12th Dynasty came to power are not known. What is known is that Amenemhat I was not related to his predecessors. His father was a priest in Thebes named Senuseret (Sesostris). His mother was named Nefret and, according to the Prophecy of Neferti, came from Elephantine in the South of Egypt.

It is possible that Amenemhat was the vizier of Mentuhotep IV, the last king of the 11th Dynasty. A stone plate found at Lisht, bearing both the names of Mentuhotep IV and of king Amenemhat I may perhaps indicate that Amenemhat I was a co-regent during the later years of Mentuhotep’s reign. This could perhaps indicate that Mentuhotep IV had intended Amenemhat to be his successor.

Figure 1. Amenemhat I, a man of non-royal origin, became the founder of the 12th Dynasty.

With the 12th Dynasty, a local god of obscure origin, Amun, would become the most important god of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon. The popularity of Amun is closely linked to the origin of Amenemhat I, whose name, containing the element Amun, shows a particular allegiance to this god. Even when Amenemhat moved the
political center of the country from Thebes to the newly built capital Itj-tawi in the Fayum oasis, located to the southwest of the old capital Memphis, Thebes would remain an important religious center. This would determine the religious and political history of Ancient Egypt for the following millennia.

The kings of the 12th Dynasty ruled the country firmly and were able to maintain the balance of power between the central authorities and the local administrations, to their own advantage.

As the founder of the dynasty, Amenemhat I, may perhaps have shared power with his predecessor, Mentuhotep IV, so would most kings of this dynasty assume kingship during the lives of their predecessors. This way, they ensured that the transition of power from one king to his successor would be smooth. This explains the overlapping year numbers in the time table below.

The kings of the 12th Dynasty also imposed their rule on northern Nubia and pacified the Bedouins in the deserts to the east and west of the Nile Valley. Huge fortresses were built in Nubia and at the Eastern border, to protect trading routes from raiding Bedouins.

The wealth and stability the 12th Dynasty has brought to the country is evidenced in the high quality of statues, reliefs and paintings found throughout the country.

Figure 2. The White Chapel of Sesostris I at Karnak is a good example of the high quality of art produced during the 12th Dynasty.
Rather typical for this period are statues with big ears, seen by some as an indication that the king and his nobility listened to their subjects. Deviating from the standard way of representing kings, Sesostris III and his successor Amenemhat III had themselves portrayed as mature, aging men. This is often interpreted as a portrayal of the burden of power and kingship. That the change in representation was indeed ideological and should not be interpreted as the portrayal of an aging king is shown by the fact that in one single relief, Sesostris III was represented as a vigorous young man, following the centuries old tradition, and as a mature aging king.

Figure 3. Sesostris III represented as an old man, a typical feature for the later 12th Dynasty.

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Amenemhat III appears to have died without any male offspring to succeed him. Towards the end of his reign, he therefore appointed a man of non-royal birth, Amenemhat IV, to be his coregent and later successor. Oddly enough, there are no indications that Amenemhat IV married into the royal family to justify his claims to the throne.
Eventhough Amenemhat IV was survived by several sons, which would later become the first kings of the 13th Dynasty, he was succeeded by Nefrusobek, a daughter of Amenemhat III. This may perhaps hint at a refusal of some members of the ruling elite to accept the family of Amenemhat IV as the new royal family. A local potentate may even have taken advantage of the dynastic troubles at the end of the 12th Dynasty, to seize control over the eastern Nile Delta, thus founding the 14th Dynasty.

Nefrusobek herself also appears to have died without any male offspring, and was succeeded by the eldest son of Amenemhat IV. With her death, the 12th dynasty came to a definitive end.

El-Lisht

Location
When Amenemhat I came to power, he left Thebes and founded a new capital, somewhere in the north. This new capital, which he named Itj-Tawi, "the one that seizes the Two Lands", has never been located. The fact, however, that almost every king of the 12th Dynasty built his funerary monument near the Fayum oasis, has led to the assumption that Amenemhat's new capital must have been located somewhere near that oasis.

Amenemhat I’s funerary monument can be found near the modern-day village of el-Lisht, a site located to the south of Dashur, not far away from Meidum. It is not unreasonable to assume that he choose this site because it was near to his new capital, all the more so since he was followed in this by his successor, Sesostris I.

Figure 4. The site of el-Lisht is located between Dashur and Meidum.
Amenemhat I

Having moved closer to the burial sites of the kings of the Old Kingdom, Amenemhat I also built his own pyramid complex closer to the standards of the Old Kingdom kings. Thus his pyramid’s size and general shape was very similar to those built during the 6th Dynasty.

The core of the pyramid was made of small blocks, sand, debris and mudbrick. Several of the smaller blocks that were used as filling actually came from other burial sites, such as the complexes of Kheops and Khefren at Giza! It is odd that Amenemhat would go that far north to quarry for limestone fillings for his pyramid, but perhaps he believed that having parts of the monuments of his predecessors integrated into his would validate his kingship and his rights for an afterlife.

The pyramid's internal structure is fairly simple, be it somewhat different from the Old Kingdom standard. The entrance was located, traditionally, at ground level, in the centre of the north face of the pyramid.

A corridor descends gently towards a chamber in the middle of the pyramid, but below ground level. The passage was blocked with huge stone blocks to prevent tomb robbers from entering.

A vertical shaft descends from the central chamber towards the burial chamber. The burial chamber is below the ground water level, which has prevented anyone from entering it. If tomb robbers left anything, it is unlikely that this would still be preserved.
Figure 5. Map of the funerary complex of Amenemhat I, showing the mastabas and tombs within the complex' enclosure (Source: Lehner, Complete Pyramids, p. 169).

Almost nothing remains of Amenemhat's mortuary temple, which was built on a terrace cut into the hill below the pyramid. All that is clear is that the temple stood east of the pyramid and that there was a causeway, probably connecting it to a Valley Temple, which has not been excavated because it lies below ground water level as well.

The complex had two enclosure walls: the inner one was made of limestone and enclosed the pyramid and the mortuary temple; the outer one was made of mudbrick. There are several mastabas within the outer enclosure, belonging to members of the royal family and entourage, including Amenemhat's mother Nefret, one of his wives, Neferi-Tatenen, and his daughter, Neferu, who were the mother and principal wife of Sesostris I respectively.

Sesostris

Sesostris I built his funerary monument on a prominent hill some 2 kilometres south of his father's.

With its base width of 105 metres and (calculated) height of 61.25 metres, Sesostris I's pyramid is the biggest since the end of the 4th Dynasty. Today, however, the only remains of this once great pyramid is a low mound of rubble, the lower part of which is still encased in limestone.

This has been caused by stone robbers, as well as the innovative building technique that Sesostris I used for his monument. The core of this pyramid was a skeleton of limestone walls that radiate from the centre. The walls were made of rough blocks which became smaller towards the top. The resulting sections were then divided into smaller compartments, which were filled with stone slabs. This was encased in fine white limestone.
Figure 6. Map of the funerary complex of Sesostris I, showing the 9 Queen's Pyramids within the complex' enclosure (Source: Lehner, Complete Pyramids, p. 170).

The entrance to the pyramid is located traditionally at ground level in the centre of the north side. The pyramid's internal structure is extremely simple and straightforward: a corridor descends from ground level to deep underneath the pyramid. It ends in the burial chamber, which was located underneath the pyramids middle.

The roof of the burial chamber was pyramid-shaped as well. The burial chamber was dug so deep that it lay just above groundwater level, but as the ground water level has risen since it was built, the burial chamber is now inaccessible.

The complex's mortuary temple stood traditionally east. It was very similar in structure to the temples of the kings of the 6th Dynasty. All the traditional elements were present, be it that alabaster, basalt or diorite were not used.

The complex had two enclosure walls. The inner enclosure wall was built around the pyramid itself and enclosed the Satellite Pyramid, located, traditionally, in the southeast, as well as the inner part of the mortuary temple. The outer enclosure wall incorporates the outer part of the mortuary temple, as well as 9 Queen's Pyramids into the complex.

Except for the first, which also seems to be the oldest, all the Queen's Pyramids had approximately the same base size. It has been suggested that these pyramids were built over time, the last one as late as the reign of Amenemhat II or Sesostris II. Each pyramid had a small chapel, which was decorated, but the internal structure of none of the pyramids seems to have been finished. In fact, it is not even certain that all of them received a burial. The name of Sesostris I' principale queen, Neferu, has been found in the first and largest pyramid, but there too, no trace of a burial has been found.

A causeway leads from the outer enclosure wall to the Valley Temple, which has never been found.

**Hawara**

**Location**

Hawara is located near the Fayum oasis, to the South, even, of Meidum, next to one of the channels connecting the Nile to the lake of the oasis. After having abandoned the plan to be buried at Dashur, the southern edge of the Memphite necropolis, Amenemhat III would chose this location, perhaps near to his palace, for his final interment.
Figure 7. Hawara is located near the Fayum oasis.

**The pyramid**

Amenemhat’s pyramid at Hawara was built with a base length of 105m and a height of 58m, rising with a slope of 48°45’.

The Hawara pyramid was thus built at a much lower slope than Amenemhat’s Dashur pyramid, which had been abandoned because its lack of stability. The fear of collapse is probably what caused the builders of the Hawara pyramid to lower the slope with as much as 9°30”.

The pyramid’s core was built entirely of mudbrick stones with only an outer mantle in limestone.

The limestone encasing has been pillaged by stone robbers centuries ago, but the limestone core still remains, giving the modern-day visitor the impression of a mudbrick mountain.
The substructure of the Hawara pyramid is a lot less complex that that of its Dashur counterpart. An interesting find that was buried in the floor of the valley temple of the Dashur complex was an architect’s model of a pyramid's substructure very similar to that of the Hawara pyramid.

The long corridors were shortened in this model, but the closing mechanism of the burial vault is shown in this model.
The entrance to the substructure is located on the west side of the south face of the pyramid. It descends down into a first chamber, from where it appears to continue to the north, leading to a dead end. A short passage in the ceiling of the first chamber, running east, then angling north and west eventually leads to an antechamber from which the actual burial chamber can be entered.

The burial chamber is often rightly described as a technical marvel. It is carved from a single piece of hard quartzite into a rectangular, unroofed room measuring 7 by 2.5 metres and a height of 1.83m, which was sunk into an open trench. Before the roof was placed over the burial room, the king's quartzite sarcophagus, a second, smaller sarcophagus and two canopic chests were lowered into it.

The roof was composed of some quartzite slabs supported by stone blocks resting on the sand next to the outer walls of the burial chamber. Once the royal burial was done, the sand next to the burial chamber was allowed to move into pits next to it, lowering the roof on top of the chamber, closing it. The ceiling blocks extended beyond the walls of the vault, resting on a ledge cut into the trench into which the vault had been sunk.

Limestone beams leaning against each other covered this trench and made sure that the pressure of the pyramid above would not press down on the burial chamber. A second, mudbrick vault separated this construction from the pyramid's substructure.

When the burial vault was opened, some bone fragments were found inside the coffins. Several objects, among them an alabaster offering table, bearing the name of princess Neferuptah, were also found in the burial vault, but it is not known why they were there, since a tomb for this princess was found at some distance to the southeast of Hawara.

**The so-called 'Labyrinth'**

The pyramid lay in the north of an elaborate complex enclosed by a wall measuring 385 by 158 metres. This makes the Hawara complex the largest Middle Kingdom funerary complex.

The entrance to the complex was located at the southern corner of the east wall. A causeway appears to have led up to it.

Unfortunately, almost nothing remains of this vast complex which Greek and Roman visitors, many centuries after it was built, described as a vast labyrinth of open courts, chambers, chapels and hidden crypts. The Greek traveler Herodotos said it
had 12 main courts and that the visitor was guided from courtyards into rooms into
galleries into more rooms and from there into more courtyards.

An interesting comparison can be made between the layout of the Hawara complex
and the complex of Netjerikhet at Saqqara. Both complexes are long rectangular
structures oriented north-south. Both have their pyramid located in the north of the
complex, be it that with Netjerikhet, there was also a court to the north of the
pyramid.

**Illahun**

**Location**

Illahun is the name of a modern village located near the opening of the Hawara
Channel from the Nile Valley into the Fayum basin.

This is the location that Sesostris II choose for his funerary monument, a choice that
stresses the growing importance of the Fayum oasis during the early 12th Dynasty.

![Map](image)

**Figure 10.** Illahun is located between Memphis and the Fayum oasis.
The pyramid

Sesostris II continued the innovative way of building his pyramid started by his predecessors. This is not only clear in the building technique that was used, but also in the groundplan of the pyramid and its surrounding complex, which deviates drastically from the 5th and 6th Dynasty stereotype.

The pyramid was built around a core of yellow limestone, around which radial and cross walls were built. This formed a framework of relatively small compartments that were filled with mudbricks.

Figure 11. Sesostris II’s pyramid was the first to be built mostly of mudbrick.

The inner structure of the pyramid is completely different from any of the pyramid’s predecessors.

Contrary to older pyramids, this monument’s entrance is not located in the north, but at the bottom of a narrow shaft located near its southeast corner. The entrance shaft was too narrow for the sarcophagus, so a second, wider shaft was dug into the ground at some distance to the south. This second shaft was then hidden beneath a sloping passage to the tomb of an unidentified princess.

The entrance shaft opens into a horizontal corridor which runs north to a hall with a vaulted ceiling. In the east of this hall, there is a well dug into the floor. It is not known how deep this well runs, but it is likely that it reached groundwater level. This would have allowed the pit to be filled with some groundwater, which the Ancient Egyptians considered to be the primeval water out of which creation had come into being. By allowing some of this primeval water into the pyramid, the king himself would be able to spring into being as well. This feature has also been found
in some tombs of the Valley of the Kings in Thebes, dated some 300 or 400 years after Sesostris II.

Figure 12. Three dimensional drawing of the pyramid complex at Illahun. Source: Lehner, Complete Pyramids, p. 175.

That this well was not a way to trick potential tomb robbers is clear from the fact that the corridor that leads to the burial chamber continues, sloping up at a slight angle, along the west of the vaulted hall. Underneath the pyramid, a first chamber opens to the west of this corridor, while the corridor continues towards an antechamber, which opens at a right angle to the west.

The burial chamber continues along the axis of the antechamber. Clad entirely in granite and with a garbled roof, it measures 5 by 3 metres and is 3 metres high. The red granite sarcophagus was placed at the far end of the burial chamber.

A small chamber opens to the south of the burial chamber. It is here that the only remains of the burial were found: a golden uraeus that once adorned the king's head and some leg bones, perhaps the king's.

A passage in the north wall loops around the burial chamber and enters the antechamber in the south. This unique feature is thought to symbolise the king's departure to the north and his re-emergence in the pyramid to the east of the burial chamber. It is also possible that it was created to symbolically make an island out of the burial chamber, which is an important aspect in the cult of Osiris, the god of the dead and of resurrection.
The pyramid complex

The inner enclosure wall was made of limestone and was decorated with niches in a way that is strongly reminiscent of the enclosure wall of Netjerikhet’s complex. An outer enclosure wall was made out of mudbrick. Rows of trees were planted parallel to it, probably also a reference to the cult of Osiris.

Against the north wall within the outer enclosure, there were eight mastabas, intended as tombs for some princesses. In the north eastern corner, there is a small pyramid. The entrance to this 18 metres high pyramid has never been found. It has been suggested that it was either a Queen’s pyramid or a satellite pyramid and it is possible that it only served a symbolic purpose.

The causeway leading to this complex has never been investigated. The Valley Temple is now completely destroyed.

The nearby tomb of princess Sithathor Iunit was found almost completely plundered. All that remained were her red granite sarcophagus and canopic jars. A hidden recess in the tomb, however, was also found to contain five wooden boxes, two of which were of inlaid ebony. These contained finely crafted pieces of jewellery, such as diadems, bracelets, rings, a cosmetic container and a mirror.