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# Who Were The Pharaohs A History Of Their Names With A List Of Cartouches

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## INTRODUCTION: THE DIVINE RULERS OF THE NILE

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The sands of Egypt have whispered secrets for millennia, but few echoes are as resonant as the names of the god-kings who once ruled the Nile Valley. When we ask, **Who were the pharaohs?**, we are not merely inquiring about ancient monarchs. We are delving into a system of absolute power, divine embodiment, and meticulous record-keeping. The pharaohs were believed to be living deities, the intermediaries between the gods and the people of Kemet (the ancient name for Egypt). Their names were not simple identifiers; they were powerful statements of dominion, lineage, and cosmic order (Ma'at). This exploration into **a history of their names with a list of cartouches** reveals a civilization obsessed with eternity, where a name carved in stone could ensure a ruler's survival in the afterlife. The cartouche, an oval enclosure with a horizontal line at one end, was the primary vehicle for this eternal identity, signifying that the name within was protected by the sun god Ra for all time.

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## THE MEANING OF "PHARAOH"

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The term "Pharaoh" itself originates from the Egyptian words *Per-aa*, meaning "Great House." Originally, this referred to the royal palace and the administrative apparatus of the state, much as we might refer to "the White House" or "the Crown" today. It was only during the New Kingdom (circa 1550-1069 BCE) that the term became synonymous with the ruler personally. Despite the grandeur of the title, the ancient Egyptians rarely called their king "Pharaoh" in formal inscriptions. Instead, they used a complex system of royal titles that defined his role as Horus, the Two Ladies, the Golden Horus, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, and the Son of Ra. These five names, known as the **royal titulary**, formed the full identity of a pharaoh, but it was the last two that were typically enclosed in a cartouche.

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## THE POWER OF THE NAME IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN BELIEF

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To understand **who were the pharaohs**, one must grasp the profound weight a name carried. In the Egyptian worldview, a name (*ren*) was a vital part of a person's being, alongside the

body, the shadow, and the soul (Ka and Ba). To speak a name was to give it power; to erase a name was to damn the individual to oblivion. This practice, known as *damnatio memoriae*, was a political weapon. Rivals would chisel a pharaoh's name from monuments in an attempt to erase his legacy from history. Conversely, placing a name within a cartouche was the ultimate act of preservation. The cartouche, derived from the hieroglyph *shenu*, represented a loop of rope tied at the base. The *shen* symbol itself signified eternity and protection. By encircling the king's name, the cartouche ensured that the pharaoh's identity would circle the sun, protected by Ra, for all eternity.

## The Five-Fold Titulary: The Full Identity of a God-King

When exploring **a history of their names with a list of cartouches**, it is essential to recognize that most pharaohs had multiple names. The full titulary was established by the Middle Kingdom and included five "Great Names":

- **The Horus Name:** The oldest title, representing the pharaoh as the incarnation of the falcon god Horus. It was usually written inside a *serekh* (a stylized palace facade), not a cartouche.
- **The Nebty Name (Two Ladies):** This name associated the king with the protector goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt: Nekhbet (the vulture) and Wadjet (the cobra). It signified the king's rule over the unified land.

- **The Golden Horus Name:** A name often associated with the concept of the god Horus triumphing over his enemy Seth, symbolizing the king's eternal victory and divine status.
- **The Nomen (Son of Ra):** This was the birth name of the pharaoh, given at his accession. It was preceded by the title *Sa Ra* (Son of Ra) and was almost always written inside a cartouche.
- **The Prenomen (King of Upper and Lower Egypt):** This was the throne name taken upon coronation. It was preceded by the title *Nesu-bity* (King of Upper and Lower Egypt) and was also enclosed in a cartouche. It is often the name modern historians use to refer to a pharaoh, especially from the New Kingdom onwards.

Therefore, when we speak of a pharaoh's cartouche, we are usually referring to either the **Nomen** or the **Prenomen** cartouche. Ramesses II, for example, had both a throne name (Usermaatra-setepenra) and a birth name (Ramesses-meryamun), each encased in its own cartouche.

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### THE EVOLUTION OF THE CARTOUCHE

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The cartouche did not always exist. Early dynastic rulers only used the *serekh* to display their Horus name. The first known use of a cartouche-like shape appeared in the 2nd Dynasty under King Nynetjer. However, it was not until the reign of Pharaoh Sneferu in the 4th Dynasty (the builder of the Red Pyramid) that the elongated oval shape with a line became standardized. The design quickly caught on, as it neatly solved the problem of how

to enclose the growing number of signs used in royal names. The cartouche became so iconic that it is one of the most recognizable symbols of ancient Egypt, even appearing on modern tourist trinkets and jewelry. For anyone asking **who were the pharaohs**, the cartouche is the definitive visual answer.

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### A HISTORY OF PHARAOHS' NAMES WITH A LIST OF CARTOUCHES

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To truly answer **who were the pharaohs**, we must travel through time, examining key rulers whose names are immortalized in hieroglyphs. Below is a curated **list of cartouches** (described in transliteration) from some of history's most significant pharaohs, alongside their meanings.

## 1. Narmer (c. 3100 BCE): The Unifier

**Cartouche Name:** Narmer did not have a cartouche; his name is found on the famous Narmer Palette inside a *serekh* representing a palace facade. His name means "Striking Catfish," a reference to his fierce power. He is considered the first pharaoh to unify Upper and Lower Egypt, a foundational event in Egyptian history.

## 2. Khufu (c. 2589–2566 BCE): The Builder of the Great Pyramid

**Cartouche Name:** Khnum-Khufu (meaning "Khnum protects me"). The Greek name Cheops is more familiar to Western audiences. His cartouche is famously found in the relieving chambers of the Great Pyramid at Giza. The sheer scale of his monument ensures that his name, though often mispronounced, is one of the most famous in history.

## 3. Hatshepsut (c. 1479–1458 BCE): The Female King

**Cartouche Names (Prenomen):** Maatkare (meaning "The Ka (soul) of Ra is Ma'at [Truth]"). **Nomen:** Hatshepsut (meaning "Foremost of Noble Women"). She is a fascinating answer to **who were the pharaohs**, as she broke gender norms, often depicted with a false beard and kilt. Her cartouches were deliberately defaced after her death by her successor Thutmose III in an act of *damnatio memoriae*.

## 4. Akhenaten (c. 1353–1336 BCE): The Heretic King

**Cartouche Names (Prenomen):** Neferkheperure-waenre (meaning "Beautiful are the forms of Ra, the Unique One of Ra"). **Nomen:** Akhenaten (meaning "Beneficial to the Aten"). He radically changed his birth name (Amenhotep IV) to honor the Aten, the sun disk. His cartouche reflects a revolution in art, religion, and politics, as he closed the temples of Amun and promoted monotheism, a seismic shift in the ancient world.

## 5. Tutankhamun (c. 1332–1323 BCE): The Boy King

**Cartouche Names (Prenomen):** Nebkheperure (meaning "The possessor of the forms of Ra"). **Nomen:** Tutankhamun (meaning "The living image of Amun"). He originally was named Tutankhaten but changed his name to reflect the restoration of the traditional god Amun after Akhenaten's death. His cartouche, found on his golden death mask, is the most widely recognized in the world due to the discovery of his intact tomb in 1922.