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PART

ONE

Introduction

OVERVIEW

Part 1 includes information and concepts which form the basis for understanding pharaonic history.

The nature of ancient Egyptian civilisation was determined to a large extent by the physical environment in which the people lived. The predominant forces of nature which influenced their lives were the Nile and its annual inundation, the deserts which encroached on the fertile ribbon of land adjacent to the river and the ever-present sun.

Chapter 1:

- stresses the duality of Egypt by distinguishing between the *Two Lands* of Upper and Lower Egypt and by defining the terms *Red Land* and *Black Land*
- explains the link between the physical environment and the distinctive lifestyle and beliefs of the ancient Egyptians.

Because of the lack of historical records and the nature of the written sources, it has been very difficult to write a connected history of ancient Egypt. Gardiner emphasised this fact when he said that the history of Egypt is 'merely a collection of rags and tatters'.[1]

Chapter 2:

- deals with the main sources of written information available to historians and the key to their decipherment — the Rosetta Stone
- discusses the advantages and disadvantages of particular written sources in building up a picture of the past

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- notes the difficulties of developing an accurate chronology for Egyptian history
- looks at Egyptian myths and legends as sources of information
- outlines the types of archaeological sources which are used to confirm or refute the written records
- points out the amount of conjecture used in filling in the gaps in the sources.

The Archaic Period (the first two dynasties of kings after the unification of the *Two Lands* in c. 3100 BC) was the formative time of Egyptian history. The pattern of kingship and the institutions of a centralised state were established. These developments laid the basis for the great accomplishments of the Old Kingdom or Pyramid Age.

Chapter 3:

- outlines the developments that appear to have occurred during the Predynastic Period
- looks at the evidence for the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt into one kingdom
- notes the apparent development of the concept of divine kingship and its various aspects.

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CHAPTER
1

The physical environment of ancient Egypt

Most civilisations have been influenced by their environment. Ancient Egypt owed much of its character to the nature of the Nile River, the length and shape of the river valley, the enclosing deserts and the climate. The Greek historian Herodotus (c. 490–420 BC) summed it up when he said:

> **Not only is the Egyptian climate peculiar and the Nile different in its behaviour from other rivers elsewhere, but the Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind.**(1)

The Nile River and the sun were the two great forces which dominated the lives of the ancient Egyptians. Their gifts of water, fertile soil and warmth created life. On the other hand they had the potential to bring destruction and death.

The Nile River

The Nile, referred to by the ancient Egyptians as simply *Iteru* or *The River* transformed an almost waterless waste of desert into one of the most fertile areas on earth.

The river's source

The Nile's source is in tropical Africa. The White Nile begins in Lake Victoria in east Africa, while the Blue Nile starts in Lake Tana in the snow-covered Ethiopian mountains. Further downstream the Blue Nile is joined by the Atbara River. At the present-day city of Khartoum, in the Sudan, these two large river systems merge to form the Nile.

Until the construction of the Aswan Dam this century, the Nile cut its way for over 1300 kilometres through the deserts of Nubia. Its flow was interrupted six times by rocky cataracts (rapids) before it entered Egypt.

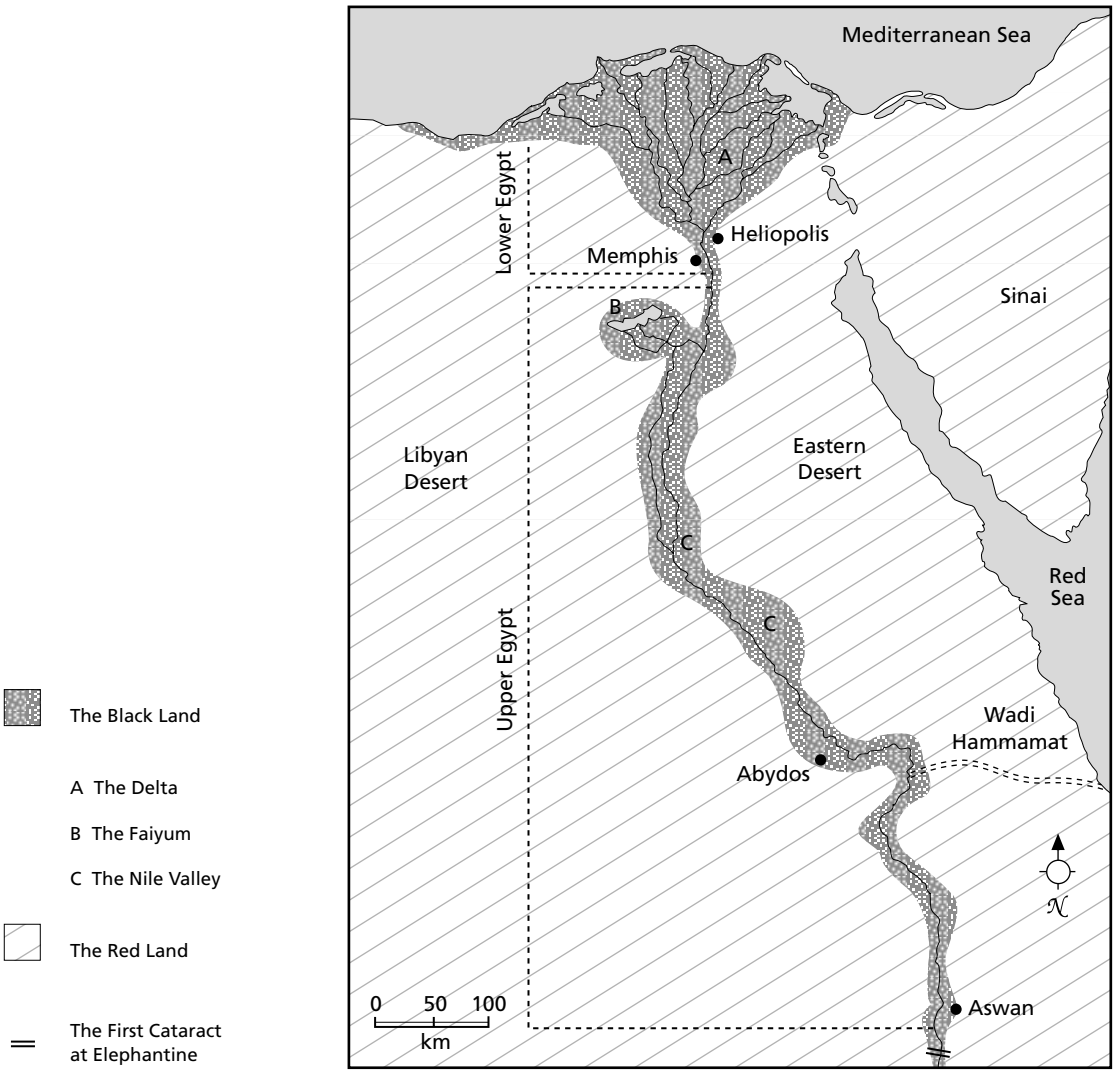
The First Cataract

The traditional southern boundary of ancient Egypt was just south of Aswan at the First Cataract. Massive boulders and outcrops of pink and black granite formed a series of rapids extending over six kilometres.

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The physical divisions of Egypt

An island known as *Abu* or *Elephant Land* (later called Elephantine Island) commanded this frontier area where the river plunged and swirled over the huge granite obstructions. Classical writers reported that during flood time the roaring of the waters was so great as to cause deafness.

For the next 800 kilometres the river wound its way northwards through a narrow valley hemmed in first by sandstone and then limestone cliffs. In places the fertile strip of land bordering the Nile was so narrow that the desert hills almost rose up out of the river. At other places the muddy river flats extended many kilometres on either side of the Nile.

The Faiyum

Further north, a branch of the Nile flowed westward into a depression 50 metres below sea level. This depression caught the surplus floodwaters and acted as a reservoir when the water level of the Nile was low. The

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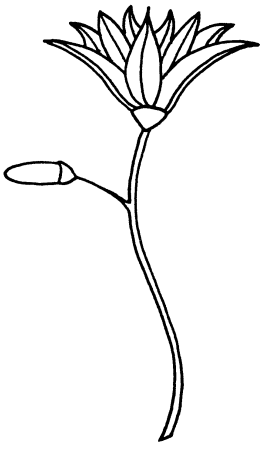


Some of the boulders that interrupt the Nile's flow at the First Cataract

land which was periodically reclaimed from this huge lake was fertile and rich in wildlife. Today it is referred to as the Faiyum.

Just north of the ancient capital of Memphis (near modern Cairo), the river divided into a number of large branches (seven reported by Herodotus) and many smaller ones as it slowly wound its way to the Mediterranean Sea. Silt was deposited in a large triangular or fan-shaped formation which the Greeks called the *delta* because of its resemblance to the shape of the fourth letter of their alphabet.

It has been observed that the valley, Faiyum and delta areas looked and still look like the long stem, bud and flower of the lotus that played an important part in Egyptian symbolism for 3000 years. According to that symbolism it was the opening lotus flower from which the sun god was born.



A lotus flower

The annual inundation or flood of the Nile

Every year at the same time the Nile flooded. This annual flood, referred to as the inundation, was without doubt the most important event in the lives of the Egyptian people. It sustained life along the valley.

During June, the Nile began to rise and green water (containing vegetable matter) appeared everywhere along the valley between Aswan and Memphis. The waters continued to rise and by August they were a dark, muddy colour (because of the eroded material they contained). The flood-waters reached their peak during September and after several weeks the level began to drop. By May of the following year, the river level was at its lowest.

Height and timing of the flood

The timing of the flood and the height of the waters were critical for the inhabitants of the valley. Ancient records indicate that when the river rose to seven and a half metres at Elephantine Island there was enough water to supply the needs of the country. A flood level over eight metres was dangerously high while a height of six metres was perilously low.

What caused this annual inundation?

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A view of the fertile Nile Valley

During late spring and early summer (in the northern hemisphere), the normal equatorial rains of central Africa were supplemented by water from the melting snows and the summer monsoons in the mountains of Ethiopia. As the water poured down the valleys of the Ethiopian highlands, it eroded the adjacent land. The free stone dust was carried along by the Blue Nile and Atbara River and eventually deposited as a dark, rich silt over the valley flats of Egypt when the river broke its banks.

Accumulations of this alluvium or alluvial soil (silt carried and deposited by rivers and streams) made the Nile Valley into one of the most fertile areas on earth.

Effects of the flood

The Nile's life-giving waters and annual deposits of rich, black soil enabled the Egyptians to develop a prosperous agricultural society instead of remaining as desert-dwelling nomads. From this agricultural society grew one of the world's greatest civilisations.

As Herodotus remarked, 'Egypt is the gift of the river'.[2]

The Black Land

Fertile black mud

The land known as Egypt in antiquity was called the *Black Land* or *Kemet* because of the fertile black silt or mud which the Nile, in flood, deposited over the valley every year.

The Black Land comprised:

- the long, narrow river valley enclosed by desert cliffs (Upper Egypt)
- the huge, lush, fan-shaped lowland area known as the delta (Lower Egypt).

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The Two Lands of Upper and Lower Egypt

In ancient times these two distinct physical regions were known as *The Two Lands — The Land of Upper Egypt* and *The Land of Lower Egypt.* Although the Nile river united these two lands into one country, each one had a distinctive character. (Refer to the map on page 4.)

Upper Egypt or *Shemau*

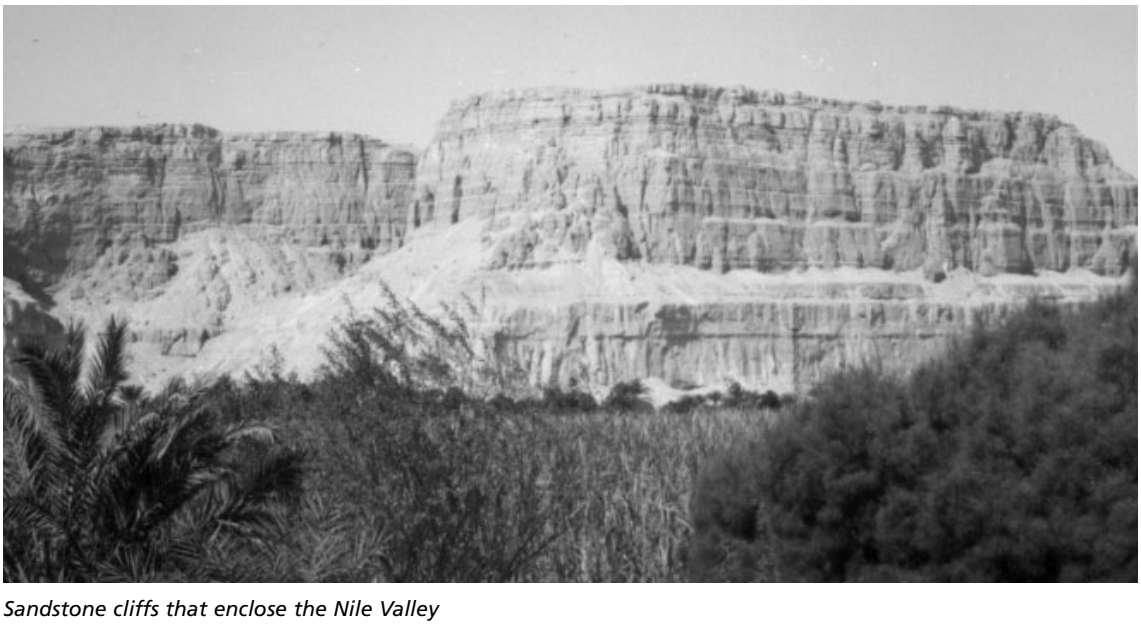
Upper Egypt extended from the First Cataract to just north of the ancient capital of Memphis, a distance of approximately 800 kilometres. It comprised a long, narrow trough, between three and eighteen kilometres wide, cut into the desert cliffs. It was somewhat isolated from outside contact by the forbidding deserts on either side. It was a five- to eight-day journey from the Nile across the eastern desert to the Red Sea.

The amount of land available for growing food was limited and it was a constant battle for the inhabitants to keep the desert sands from covering their valuable farmland. These farmers depended totally on the yearly flood for their survival.

The excessively dry heat of Upper Egypt was occasionally tempered by the cooling effects of the north wind, and the perpetual sunshine produced a brilliant light.

Lower Egypt or *To-mehu*

Lower Egypt was a broad triangular or fan-shaped area of land with its apex just north of Memphis and its base extending along the Mediterranean coastline. It covered an area twice the size of the valley and was more naturally fertile than Upper Egypt. Its marshes were thick with



Sandstone cliffs that enclose the Nile Valley

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papyrus and other reeds and teemed with bird and animal life. The desert was further away from the settlements of Lower Egypt and the climate was milder and moister than Upper Egypt.

Because of its Mediterranean coastline Lower Egypt had closer contact with other cultures although it was more vulnerable to infiltration and invasion.

The *Two Lands* differed in more than just physical features. The people spoke different dialects and some would have probably felt like foreigners in the other's land. Also, each land had its own distinguishing emblems and protective deities:

- Upper Egypt — the sedge (a type of reed) and the vulture goddess, Nekhbet
- Lower Egypt — the bee and the cobra goddess, Wadjet (Edjo).

Before these Two Lands were united into one kingdom (c. 3100 BC), each one had its own ruler who wore a distinctive crown — the tall conical White Crown of Upper Egypt and the Red Crown of Lower Egypt.

The Red Land

In contrast to the fertile Black Land of the valley and delta, the deserts were referred to as the *Red Land* or *Deshret* because of their dominant colour.

Land of the Dead

The desert plateaux and cliffs bordering the valley, where the Egyptians buried their dead, built some of their temples and hunted wild animals, were the only parts of the desert regarded as part of Egypt proper.

Oases

The Egyptians referred to the entire desert area west of the Nile as Libya. It was a desolate region of rocks and sand dunes broken only by a line of oases. This desert held little interest for the Egyptians although the oases provided trade links with the more remote areas. During later periods of Egyptian history the oases were used as places of political banishment. This inhospitable desert isolated Egypt from the west, except for the narrow coastal strip approaching the delta.

To the east of the Nile Valley, high forbidding desert mountains stretched away to the Red Sea. There were several routes through the mountains, which followed dry river beds called wadis.

Minerals and stones

This desert was exploited extensively by the Egyptians for its minerals as well as for its abundant supply of building and semi-precious stones. To the north, a route led from the delta area to the Sinai Peninsula where the Egyptians mined copper and turquoise.

Nubia

The land south of the First Cataract was referred to as Nubia, parts of which were incorporated into Egypt at various times. Lower Nubia, the area between the First and Second Cataract, seems to have been regarded almost as Egyptian by right. Not only was Nubia exceptionally rich in gold but it was the main route through which passed the more exotic products of tropical Africa, so prized by the Egyptians.

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The effect of the physical environment on Egyptian lifestyle and beliefs

The ancient Egyptians developed a distinctive lifestyle and belief system because:

- they lived in a long, narrow valley and marshy delta enclosed by barren, inhospitable deserts
- they were totally dependent on the life-giving waters of the Nile
- they enjoyed a climate where the sun shone constantly and where there was virtually no rain.



The shadouf, an ancient device for raising water, still in use along the Nile

Lifestyle

Almost all activities in Egypt, from the more mundane tasks of the farmer to the coronation of the king, were determined by the Nile and its annual flood.

The yearly calendar

There were three seasons in the yearly calendar.

1. Akhet
2. Perit
3. Shemu.

Akhet was the season of the flood which began sometime in July. The first day of the inundation, when the life-giving waters began to rise, was one of only two days when a king could hold his coronation.

The king's coronation

At this time most of the large-scale building activities were carried out since the extensive floodwaters allowed barges, transporting the massive blocks of stone, to get closer to the building sites. While their land was under water, farmers were often conscripted to work in gangs on the construction of temples and other major works. Normally they had little to do at this time except hand feed their animals and repair equipment.

Perit, which began in November was called the *Season of Coming Forth*. It was the time of sowing the seeds. The first day of this season was the only other time that the king could be officially crowned. On the first five days of Perit the kings also held their important 30-year jubilee or Sed (also called Heb-sed) festival. Since the purpose of this festival was to rejuvenate the king's powers it was natural that it should be celebrated when the land had been rejuvenated by the silt-carrying floodwaters.

Heb-sed festival

This was the period of most intensive activity along the Nile. Farmers raced against time to conserve the floodwaters by repairing dykes and

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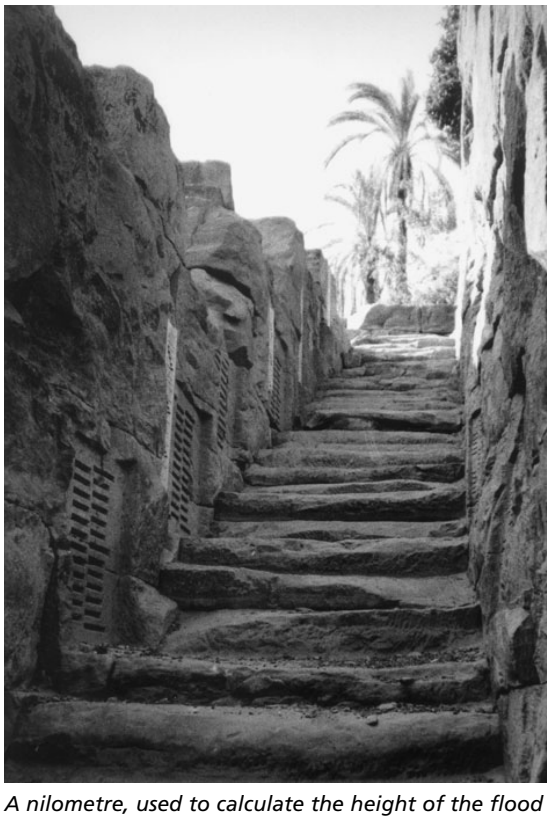
cleaning out ditches and canals; to spread the rich silt; to plough the fields and sow the seed before the land began to dry out too much.

Shemu was the season of harvest and began sometime in early March. A celebration held at the beginning of the harvest season, the Festival of Min, god of fertility, was possibly the highlight of the year for the Egyptian peasant farmer.

Harvest and tax collection

It was a hectic time of the year. Farmers harvested, threshed, winnowed, stored and transported the grain and flax while scribes recorded the harvest, carried out the census, assessed and collected the taxes.

Administration



A nilometre, used to calculate the height of the flood

All Egyptians, from the lowliest peasant farmers to the highest officials, depended on the Nile for their survival. For this reason it was necessary to have a central authority to control water supplies. Due to the great length of the Nile valley, a huge bureaucracy of government officials, skilled in calculation, measurement and writing was needed:

- to make predictions about the timing and nature of the flood
- to plan irrigation works
- to organise local community effort to get the land back in order after the flood
- to re-survey the land and mark out farm boundaries which had disappeared under the floodwaters.

A *normal* flood could be easily controlled. However, sometimes emergencies occurred. A flood level about 1.5 metres lower than normal at Elephantine Island meant food shortages and a series of low-level floods could cause a life-threatening famine. However, a water level 30 to 60 centimetres higher than normal was destructive, causing serious damage to houses, dykes and canals. Such emergency situations could only be handled by a large-scale community effort.

Conscripted gangs

Local nobles, responsible to the central government, conscripted, organised and supervised large work gangs to build and maintain irrigation schemes. This unpaid work was onerous but necessary.

Land was valued and taxes, in the form of produce, were assessed by government officials on the basis of the height of the flood. For example, some land always received the benefit of the flood and so had the potential for a good harvest. On the other hand, some parcels of land were

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