

1. Environmental Factors and Early Human Settlement

In ancient times, environmental factors influenced people's choices of where to settle. Three important environmental factors were water, **topography**, and **vegetation**.

topography the shape and elevation of surface features, such as mountains or deserts, of a place or region

vegetation the plants of a place or region

Water The most important environmental factor in early human settlement was water. Physical features like rivers, lakes, and inland seas were good sources of fresh water.

Water was important for many reasons. People needed fresh drinking water to live. They also bathed and washed things in fresh water to prevent disease.

Water was also a source of food. People caught fish from rivers, lakes, and seas. They hunted water birds and other animals that gathered near water.

In addition, farmers often settled near rivers because they used it to grow their crops. A river's natural flooding could help irrigate their farms. Farmers could also dig canals or trenches to direct river water to their crops. For example, farmers in Mesopotamia dug canals for this purpose.

Water was also used for transportation. Cities and towns often used rivers as "highways," allowing people to travel in boats to visit relatives and trade goods. Towns near the sea could trade goods with countries far away.

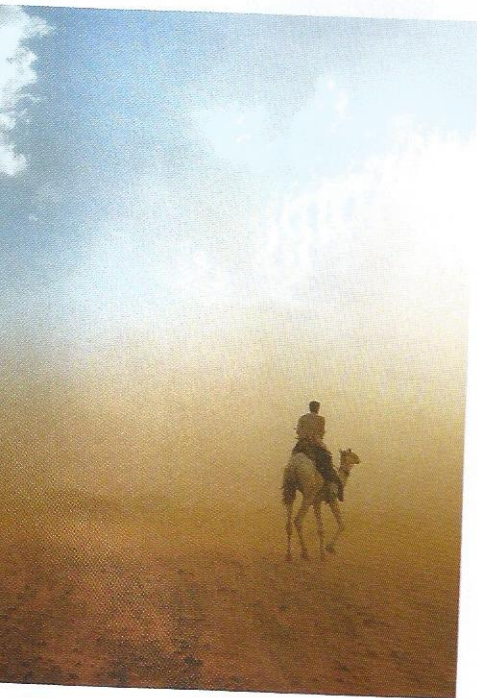
Topography A second environmental factor was topography, which refers to the shape and elevation of the land. It includes features like mountains, hills, plains, valleys, and deserts.

The topography of an area was important for early human settlement. Farmers preferred to settle in flat, open areas such as plains and valleys. Large, flat spaces gave farmers room to plant crops. Additionally, the rich soil in coastal plains and river valleys was ideal for growing these crops.

Mountains, however, were less friendly to human settlement. Steep mountains were tough to cross. Their jagged peaks, cold temperatures, and rocky land made farming difficult.

Deserts further discouraged settlement because they were hot and dry, so they contained very little water for farming. Sandstorms occurred when strong winds carried dense clouds of sand that could block out the sun. Due to the intense heat, lack of water, and sandstorms, traveling and living in the desert presented challenges.

Sandstorms are extremely dangerous because they drastically decrease visibility. Even during the day, sandstorms can make the sky very dark.





Vegetation A third environmental factor was vegetation, or plant life. There are many kinds of vegetation, such as trees, bushes, flowers, grass, and reeds. The crops people grow are also a type of vegetation.

Many **aspects** of physical geography affect vegetation. A climate with mild weather and regular rain is ideal for plant life. Fresh water supports the growth of vegetation. The areas around rivers and lakes are usually green and lush. Mountains are often covered with thick groves of trees. Dry and hot deserts have very little vegetation.

The vegetation in an area influenced early human settlement in several ways. Most important, plants were a source of food. People could eat the wild plants available as well as the crops they planted. Vegetation had other uses as well. People learned to make many useful products out of plants, including baskets, tools, medicine, rope, and even paper. Trees provided shade from the hot sun, while plants and flowers added natural beauty to a place.

Wherever people settled in the ancient world, water, topography, and vegetation were important factors. Let's look at how these environmental factors influenced the early settlements of the Egyptians, Kushites, and Israelites.

Identify three environmental factors in this photograph. Why might they influence the people living here?

Nile River the longest river in the world, flowing through eastern Africa to a delta in northeastern Egypt

Egypt a nation in Northeast Africa, first settled around 3100 B.C.E.

Kush a society along the Nile River, south of Egypt, from about 2000 B.C.E. to 350 C.E.

Mediterranean Sea a body of water north of Africa

2. Environmental Factors and the Early Settlement of Egypt and Kush

The Egyptians and Kushites both settled near the **Nile River**. The Egyptians lived along the northern part of the river, while the Kushites lived to the south.

Why did settlements in these areas cluster around the Nile River? Let's look at the physical features of **Egypt** and **Kush** to see how environmental factors favored settlement near the Nile.

Physical Features of Egypt and Kush The most important physical feature in ancient Egypt and Kush was the Nile River. Flowing north from East Africa, the Nile created a long, fertile valley that ended in a marshy delta where the river emptied into the **Mediterranean Sea**.

The Libyan Desert borders the Nile River Valley on the west, while the Nubian Desert borders it on the east. These sandy

deserts were extremely hot and dry. Most people avoided these areas, although the deserts did play one significant role in the settlement of Egypt and Kush. They formed a natural barrier that helped protect people living in the Nile River valley. The deserts did not support large settlements, and few invaders wanted to risk crossing these harsh places.

On the northern border of Egypt was the Mediterranean Sea. Settlers could not drink its sparkling salt water, but the sea was rich in fish and other kinds of seafood. It was also a waterway that linked ancient Egypt to other civilizations.

To the east of Egypt and Kush was a long channel of very salty water called the Red Sea. The climate in this area was hot and dry. Much of the land near the Red Sea was desert.

This map shows bodies of water that encouraged settlement and travel in parts of ancient Egypt and Kush. It also shows deserts, which made life and travel challenging.

Physical Features of Ancient Egypt and Kush





Environmental Factors and Human Settlement in Egypt and Kush Environmental factors in ancient Egypt and Kush greatly favored settlement near the Nile River. Most importantly, the Nile was a source of fresh water in an area that was mostly desert.

The lack of water in the deserts made them unfit for farming, but the Nile River provided the valley with natural irrigation and fertilization. Every summer, the river overflowed its banks, soaking the dry ground for several weeks. As the water level decreased, a thin layer of silt (very fine particles of rock perfect for farming) was left behind.

Additionally, where there was fresh water, people were more likely to find fish to catch and animals to hunt. The abundant wildlife in the Nile region included fish, ducks, geese, hippos, crocodiles, giraffes, and ostriches.

The topography of the river valley also encouraged human settlement. In the south, parts of the Nile ran through narrow valleys between steep hills. But there were also wide, flat areas of land around deep bends in the river. These flat areas were good for farming. In the north, the Nile's annual flooding watered the wide plains.

Vegetation was rare in the dry deserts, but it was plentiful in the Nile River valley. Useful plants included reeds and a tough water plant called papyrus. People wove reeds into baskets and roofs for their huts. Papyrus was used to make rope and paper. And the rich farmland was good for growing crops like wheat and barley.

Africa's Nile River is the longest river in the world at more than 4,100 miles long. Flowing from south to north, it empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

Deserts are natural barriers against invaders. Would you spend days crossing this hot, dry desert to fight those who live on the other side?

