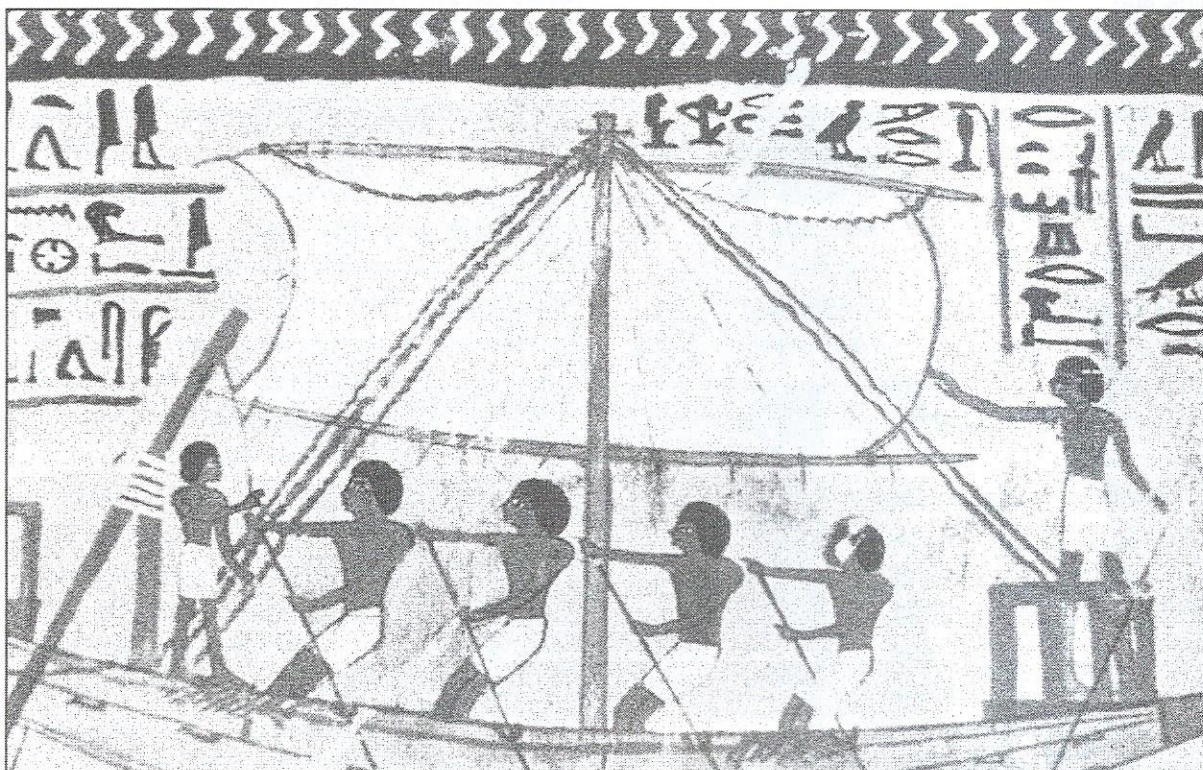


How Did the Nile Shape Ancient Egypt?

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A wall painting from the tomb of Sennefer, mayor of Thebes and Overseer of the Royal Gardens during the reign of Amenhotep II, 1426-1400 BCE

Overview: Ancient Egyptian society lasted almost 3,000 years. It began with the unification of Egypt under the first pharaoh in 2920 BCE and ended when the Romans conquered the kingdom in 30 BCE. Of special interest to us is the mighty Nile, the longest river in the world, which flowed through this rich and vibrant civilization. This Mini-Q explores the importance of the Nile to the people of Ancient Egypt.

The Documents:

- Document A: Ancient Egypt (map)
- Document B: The Nile River Flood Cycle (chart)
- Document C: Transport on the Nile
- Document D: Field of Reeds (tomb painting)
- Document E: Hymn to the Nile

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

How Did the Nile Shape Ancient Egypt?

In today's society, it is easy to forget the importance of rivers. Ours is a world of highways and airports, of supermarkets and shopping malls. When we travel or want food, we don't think "river." When we bathe or get thirsty, we think shower or bottled water.

This has not always been the case. In fact, four of the world's most important ancient cultures are known by historians as the "river civilizations." These were Mesopotamia on the Tigris-Euphrates River, China on the Yangste ("yang-see"), India on the Indus, and Egypt on the Nile. They are called the river civilizations because of the powerful influence a large river system had on the lives of the people. And nowhere was this more true than in the ancient kingdom of Egypt.

Perhaps the most stunning fact about Egypt is its age. The first pharaoh began his rule in 2920 BCE, nearly 5,000 years ago. From this early beginning, Egypt has been a land of contrasts, a place of hot, sunny days and cold nights, of crop-laden fields and empty desert. In its early days, Egypt was two distinct kingdoms. To the south was Upper Egypt, where the Nile flows north out of the mountains. To the north was Lower Egypt where the river spreads into a delta before emptying into the Mediterranean. Egyptians also spoke of the "**Black Land**" and the "**Red Land**." The Black Land hugged the Nile. The Red Land was the desert just beyond. The Black Land represented life. The Red Land meant danger. For Egyptians, the Nile literally meant the difference between life and death.

The source of the Nile was a mystery to the ancient Egyptians. Now we know that one branch, called the Blue Nile, begins in Lake Tana in the highlands of Ethiopia. The other main branch, the White Nile, begins with the waters that flow into and then out of Lake Victoria in Kenya. Every

year, when heavy rains fall in central Africa, the **tributaries** of the Blue and White Nile grow full and flow into the main river. The mother Nile, its waters replenished, then flows north and into Egypt. There, the water spills over its banks and covers the low-lying flood plain. For thousands of years, this flooding cycle has provided a seasonal rhythm for the Egyptian people.

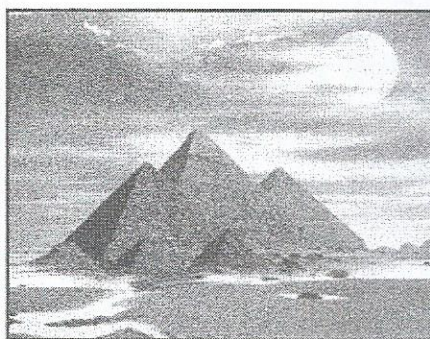
The flooding cycle determined the planting season for farmers. Their main crops were barley and emmer-wheat for making bread and beer. People paid their taxes in wheat, and wheat was a main export. Farmers also grew flax for producing fine linen, and harvested **papyrus** from the marshy areas along the river and in

the delta. **Irrigation** channels from the Nile flowed to smaller gardens where farmers grew vegetables such as onions, beans, and cucumbers. Date, fig, and pomegranate trees were tended along the river.

While fruits, grains, and vegetables might sound like the makings of a healthful

diet, one ingredient of Egyptian meals was definitely not good: desert sand. Sand was everywhere, easily settling into the dough for flat bread, a basic food eaten by everyone. Once the ever-present sand ground down a person's teeth, infection and pain set in. Thus, dental disease became a common medical problem in Ancient Egypt.

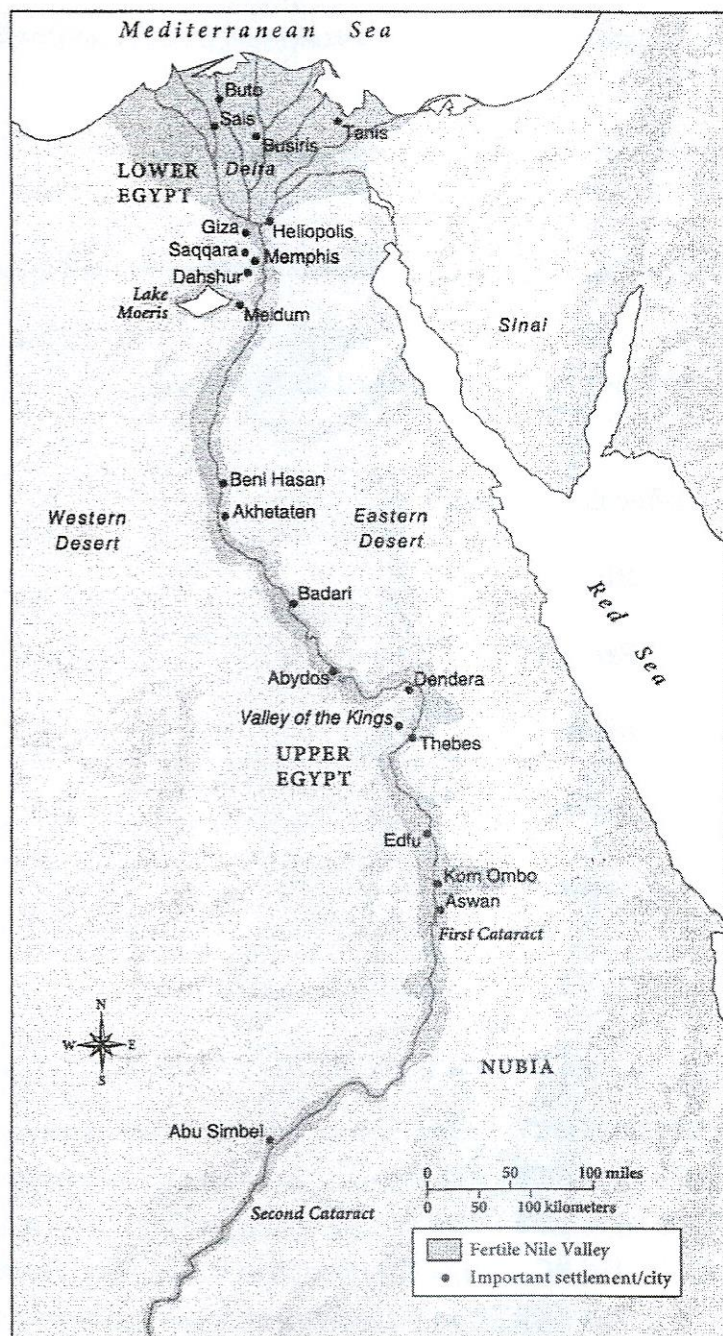
Let's time-travel to this fertile yet hostile land where life revolved around the ebb and flow of a single waterway. On the following pages are five documents that provide a glimpse of Egyptian life thousands of years ago. As you read the documents, think about how the Nile gave rise to a civilization that, all this time later, continues to fascinate. Then answer the question: *How did the Nile shape Ancient Egypt?*



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Document A

Egypt circa 1500 BCE



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Document B

Source: Chart adapted from Katherine Hinds, *Life in Ancient Egypt: The Countryside*, Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2007.

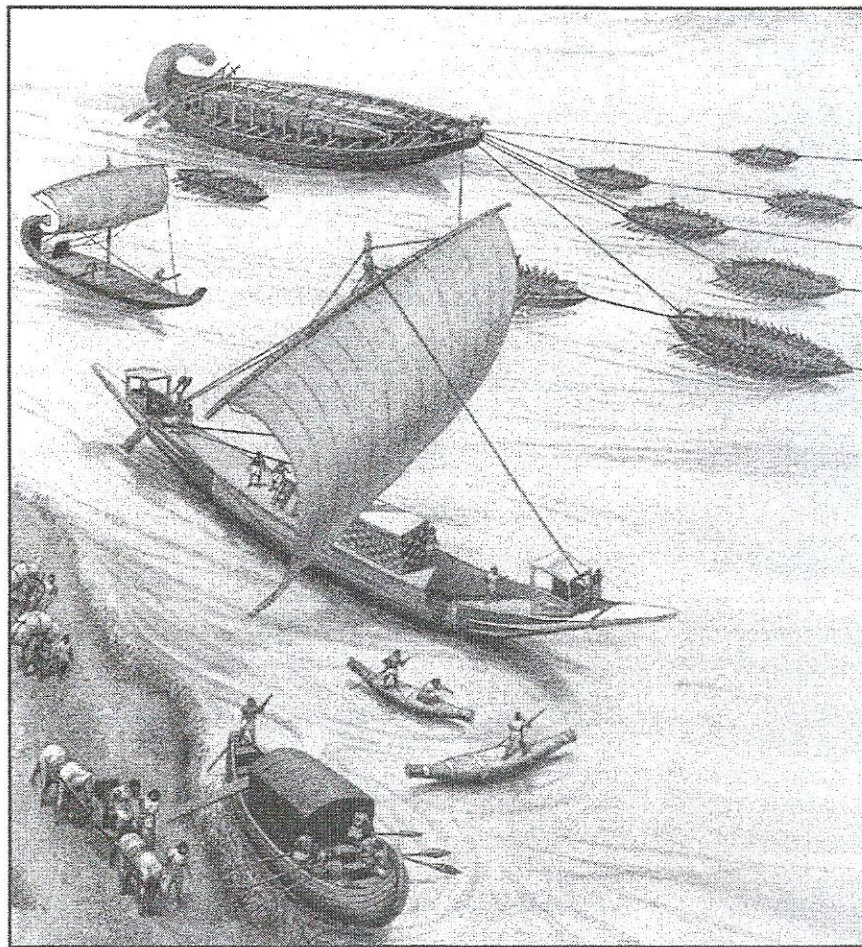
The Nile River Flood Cycle

Akhet (flood season) Mid-June to mid-October	Fields in the Nile floodplain covered in water and fertilized by a new batch of silt. Time when many farmers worked off their public-labor tax, doing jobs like canal repair or quarrying.
Peret (planting & growing season) Mid-October to mid-February	Waters receded but Nile high enough to fill irrigation canals; crops planted and tended
Shemu (harvest season) Mid-February to mid-June	Crops in the Lower Nile harvested and sent to market

Note: Average rainfall, historically and today, has remained about the same. The Nile delta receives about four inches per year. The Nile Valley south of Cairo receives less than one inch. In comparison, Atlanta, Georgia, gets about 50 inches of rain annually and Phoenix, Arizona, about eight inches.

Document C

Source: Illustration by Oliver Frey in *Living in Ancient Egypt*, Norman Bancroft Hunt, editor, Thalamus Publishing, 2009.



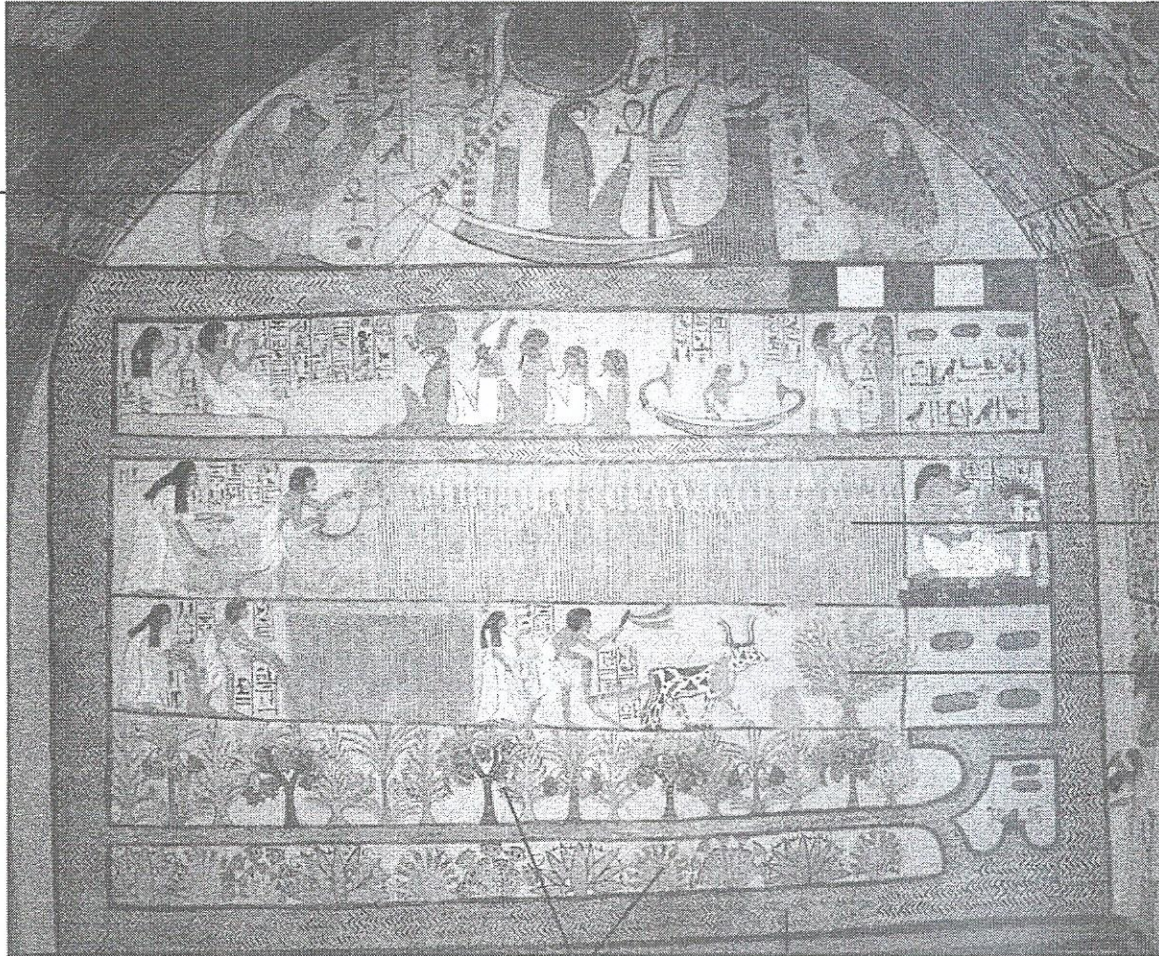
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Note: The Nile River flows south to north against a prevailing northerly wind. In ancient times, boats traveling upstream against the Nile current used a sail or rowers or both. Boats traveling downstream to the north often just floated with the help of steering oars. The Nile current was about four knots (4 mph) during flood season. It slowed to a sluggish one knot (1 mph) during the rest of the year.

Document D

Source: Painting from the tomb of a tradesman named Sennedjem, who lived sometime between 1307 and 1196 BCE.

Note: The afterlife of Ancient Egypt was a paradise called the Field of Reeds, shown in this tomb painting. Those whose heart had the correct weight at death could, after a long journey, live in the Field of Reeds forever. The Field of Reeds was believed to be somewhere in the east, near the rising sun.



Top:

The sun god, Ra, traveling across the sky in his boat. Baboons, because they were so noisy in the morning, were believed to be worshipping Ra.

Bottom panels:

Date palms and ornamental plants

Border:

The Nile River and irrigation canals

Middle panels:

Harvesting emmer wheat; harvesting flax to weave into linen cloth

Document E

Source: From the song "Hymn to the Nile," circa 2100 BCE.

Hail to you, oh Nile,
spring from the ground, come to keep the land alive...
who floods the fields that Ra [the sun god] has created
to make all the animals live...
who produces barley and makes wheat grow,
that the temples might be in festival.

If he is sluggish, noses suffocate,
 everyone is impoverished....
If he rises, the land is in exultation,
 and everyone is in joy.