

How Did the Nile Shape Ancient Egypt?

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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 Yangtze ("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?*



Background Essay Questions

1. Name four important river civilizations of the ancient world.
2. List two or three pairs of contrasts that describe ancient Egypt.
3. What are two of the sources of the Nile?
4. How did the flooding cycle provide a seasonal rhythm for the Egyptian people?
5. Why was sand a health threat for Egyptians?
6. Define these terms:

Black Land

Red Land

tributaries

papyrus

irrigation

Timeline

2920-2575 BCE – Early Dynastic Period: The first pharaohs unify Egypt into a powerful kingdom.

2575-2134 BCE – Old Kingdom: big advances in technology and architecture; pyramids built at Giza

2040-1640 BCE – Middle Kingdom: Egypt's population, religion and the arts flourish.

1550-1070 BCE – New Kingdom: Egypt expands into Syria and Nubia; international trade routes established.

712-332 BCE – Late Period: Persians invade and annex Egypt.

332-304 BCE – Alexander the Great defeats Persians; establishes new capital in Egypt called Alexandria.

30 BCE – Egypt falls to Roman Empire.