

Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-2c The Land and People of Egypt

Book Title: World Civilizations

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3-2c The Land and People of Egypt

Like Mesopotamia, Egypt depended on the waters of a great river system. Egypt is, and has always been, the valley of the Nile—a green strip averaging about thirty miles wide, with forbidding desert hills on either side. The 4000-mile-long river—the world’s longest—originates far to the south, in the lakes of central Africa, and flows north until it empties into the Mediterranean Sea at Alexandria.

Unlike the unpredictably flooding Tigris and Euphrates, the Nile is a benevolent river, and without it, life in Egypt would have been unthinkable. In contrast to the Tigris, the Nile would annually swell gently in late summer until it overflowed its low banks and spread out over the valley floor, carrying with it a load of extremely fertile silt. Two or three weeks later, the flood would subside, depositing the silt to renew the valley with a fresh layer of good topsoil. The Egyptians trapped receding waters in a series of small reservoirs connected to an intricate system of gated ditches, which would later convey the water into the surrounding fields for irrigation.

The Egyptian population was composed overwhelmingly of farmers, who lived in the villages that crowded along the Nile. Most were free tenants, working on the estates of large landholders or government officials who had been granted the land as payment for services to the crown. Farm life was possible only on the Nile’s floodplain, so fields and villages alike were sited within a few hundred yards of the riverbanks. Each day the peasants would go out to work in the fields, care for the irrigation works, or tend the animals. As agrarian farmers, their implements were simple, typically fashioned by themselves or village craftsmen from materials available to them in their natural surroundings. There was little mechanization, so all farm work was labor intensive; the sweat of humans or animals was the only energy source available to perform essential chores such as digging or repairing channels, turning the soil, planting, weeding, and harvesting.

As in Mesopotamia and other agrarian civilizations, Egypt’s peasants had an intimate relationship with their natural environment that had grown from centuries of experience working it, making it productive, and passing on their accumulated understanding to their descendants. Soil, plants, insects, and animal life were known and exploited for all the life-giving secrets they held. Equally crucial to their success was the protection strong governments afforded them and the regularity of the seasonal cycles they could count on for making farming dependable and predictable. Above all, it was this regularity and predictability of all that humans and nature could provide that was the secret of Egyptian civilization. It was such an important principle that Egyptians personified it as a goddess named [Maat \(\(MAHT\) Egyptian goddess of universal order and balance.\)](#) (MAHT; see “[Philosophy, Religion, and Eternal Life](#)” later in this chapter).

Egyptian Irrigation.

For thousands of years, Egyptian peasants have relied on simple, manual devices called *shadufs* (shah-DOOFS) to move water from the Nile River into channels that carry this life-giving resource to distant fields away from the riverbanks.



Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

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