

ANCIENT EGYPT

General Editor:
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Ancient Egypt

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NOTE
The abbreviations CE and BCE are used throughout this book:
CE Common Era (the equivalent of AD)
BCE Before the Common Era (the equivalent of BC)
Captions to pages 1–5 appear on p.256

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THE GIFT OF THE NILE



"Egypt," wrote the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE, "is so to speak the gift of the Nile." According to the priests, he said, Egypt was nothing but marsh before the land was created by layer upon layer of silt deposited by the great river. Modern geographers might differ in their account of Egypt's physical origins, but the central role of the river in the life of the country is as evident today as it was in ancient times.



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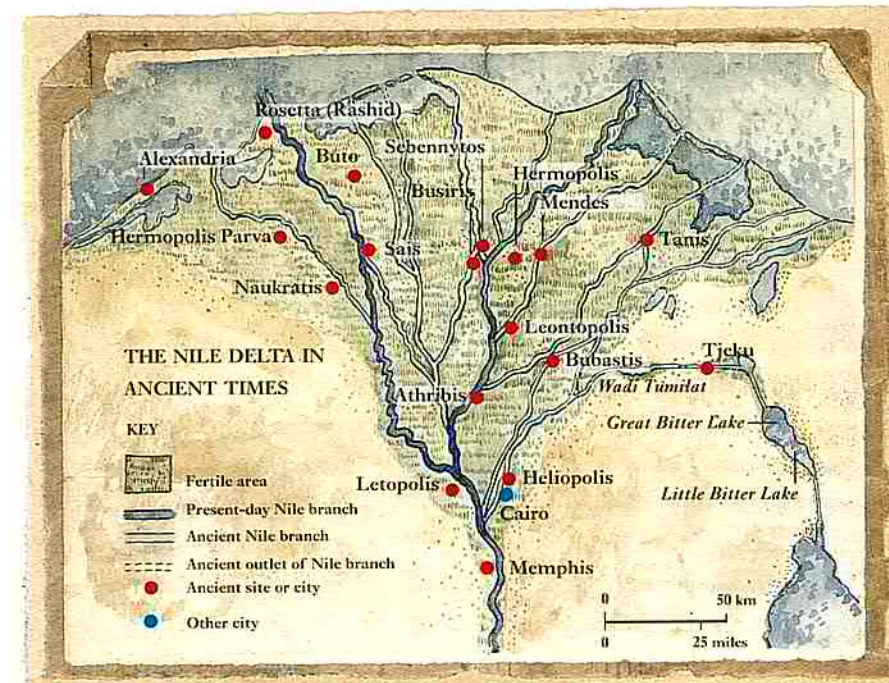
THE RIVER IN THE SAND

Egypt lies at the northern end of the longest river in the world: the Nile, which rises in the East African highlands and flows into the Mediterranean more than four thousand miles (6,500km) away. The rhythm of the river was the most important feature of life in ancient Egypt. Until this century, when huge dams have been built to control the Nile's flow, monsoon rains in Ethiopia caused it to swell along its lower reaches and inundate the surrounding countryside every year from June to October. Most of Egypt's population were farmers, who stood idle during the inundation, unless they were called up to work on public monuments such as the king's tomb. When the Nile receded, it deposited rich silt, ensuring that the farmers always planted in fertile soil. Except for those years when the flood was disastrously high or low, Egyptians were secure in their knowledge that the river would guarantee them enough to eat (see pp.12–13).

The Nile in Egypt has two main parts: the Valley and the Delta, corresponding to the ancient divisions of the country into Upper and Lower Egypt. The Valley, some 660 miles (1,060km) long, is a remarkable canyon that is an offshoot of the African Great Rift Valley. The floodplain occupies 4,250 square miles (11,000km²) and ranges in width from just one and a quarter miles (2km) at Aswan to eleven miles (17km) at el-Amarna.

At present, the Nile splits near Cairo into two branches that flow into the sea at Rosetta (Rashid) and Damietta (Dumyat). These are all that remain of several branches that existed until medieval times (see map, opposite). The silt left by the branches formed a broad triangle of fertile land that covers some 8,500 square miles (22,000km²). The Greeks called this land the "Delta" because its shape reminded them of the inverted fourth letter of their alphabet (Δ). The Delta is fifty-seven feet (17m) above sea level near Cairo and is fringed in the coastal regions by lagoons, wetlands, lakes and sand dunes. In parts of the eastern Delta there are conspicuous low hills known as "turtle backs". These sandy "islands" in the surrounding silty plain were rarely submerged by the annual inundation and in Predynastic times (to ca. 4000BCE) villages and burial grounds

ABOVE: The shaduf, a device for lifting water out of the Nile and emptying it into irrigation trenches, dates from pharaonic times and is still in use today in parts of rural Egypt.



became established on their slopes. From the Old Kingdom (ca. 2625–2130BCE) onward, the apex of the Delta was close to Memphis, the ancient capital. It is now fifteen miles (25km) north of Cairo.

The Nile divides the eastern margin of the Sahara into the Western Desert (also known as the Eastern Sahara and the Libyan Desert) and the Eastern Desert. The Western Desert covers about two-thirds of Egypt, and its most striking features are a series of rocky desert plateaux and sandy depressions, in which nestle lush oases (see map, p.50). The Eastern Desert, characterized by the prominent Red Sea Hills, was important in pharaonic times for its minerals (see map, p.65). The Sinai, essentially an extension of the Eastern Desert across the Gulf of Suez, was also a major source of minerals, especially copper. Wheat, barley, sheep and goats were domesticated in the Near East at least two thousand years before they appeared in the Nile Valley. Herders in the deserts of Palestine and the Sinai were probably driven to seek refuge in the Delta by great droughts seven thousand years ago.

The Western Desert, which was not always as dry as it is today, has yielded the oldest evidence of humankind in Egypt. Tools at least half a million years old have been found close to long-vanished rivers and springs, and the first domesticated cattle in Africa may have been tended ca. 9000BCE near ephemeral lakes (*playas*) in the southwest of the Western Desert, not far from the present-day border with Sudan. It may well be in these areas that the roots of Egypt's civilization lie: here, herders took the first steps toward complex social organization and developed fundamental elements of Egyptian society and religion, before the increasing aridity of the region forced them to drift toward the Nile Valley (see pp.106–7).

A map of the Nile Delta in ancient times, showing the possible course of its numerous distributaries. According to Greek and Roman historians, there were once at least five and possibly as many as sixteen Nile branches. Changes in the hydrographic regimes of the Nile between the 10th and 12th centuries CE were responsible for the reduction of the branches to just two, flowing into the sea at Rosetta and Damietta (see illustration, below).

A colour-enhanced Landsat satellite view of Egypt and the Nile: the red areas represent the fertile floodplain. The meanders of the Nile have drifted over time. During the Old Kingdom, the main channel was close both to Memphis and to the limestone quarries near Tura on the opposite side. Over the last millennium, the river has shifted eastward: for example, most of the west bank of Cairo accrued between the 10th and 14th centuries.



MATERIAL RESOURCES

Abundant food supplies were supplemented by other important economic resources. Flax was used to make fine linen garments and rope. Now rare in Egypt, papyrus grew in great thickets in the marshes and swamps. The stalks were sliced into strips to make sheets (a sheet consisted of one layer of horizontal strips placed over a layer of vertical strips). The two layers were then beaten together to make the best writing material available until the arrival of paper in Arab times. Other reeds and grasses were turned into mats and baskets. Nile mud provided clay for pottery and sun-dried bricks.

Egyptian sycamore, fig and acacia were employed in shipbuilding, but better-quality timber had to be imported. Lebanese cedar was used for ships, fine chests and coffins.

The Nile at Beni Hasan in Upper Egypt, about 15 miles (25km) north of el-Minya. The agricultural floodplain contrasts with the desert that begins abruptly on either side.



THE NURTURING WATERS

The civilization of Egypt and its spectacular achievements were based throughout its history on the prosperity of a mainly agrarian economy. The country's verdant green fields and bountiful food resources depended on the fertile soil of the Nile floodplain and the annual summer flood, which commenced in mid-June and lasted until mid-October (see p.10). As soon as the waters began to recede, the farmers returned to their sodden fields to sow their seeds. The crops were ready for harvest from February to early June, when the Nile was at its lowest level.

Egyptian agriculture involved the cultivation of a wide range of plants, the most common being emmer-wheat and barley, staples from which Egyptians made bread, cakes and a nutritious type of beer that was frequently flavoured with spices, honey or dates. The predominantly cereal diet was supplemented by fava beans, lentils and peas (good sources of protein); and other vegetables grown included lettuces, cucumbers, leeks, onions and radishes. Among the most popular fruits, grown in orchards, were melons, dates, sycamore figs and pomegranates. Grapes were also cultivated and were used to make both red and white wines. Oils were extracted from flax and the castor-oil plant (*Ricinus communis*), as well as from sesame in Ptolemaic times. The Egyptians also grew a wide variety of herbs for medicinal purposes.

Poultry and livestock had an important place in the economy. Geese were a common sight along the canals and villages that lined the Nile, and at the time of the annual inundation, migratory water birds flocked to

Egypt from afar. Pintail ducks, in particular, were caught in nets and snared in traps. Farmers also kept sheep, goats, cattle and pigs. Donkeys were Egypt's main beasts of burden and chief mode of transport on land. Horses were introduced only during the New Kingdom (after ca. 1539BCE); camels and buffaloes did not appear in the Egyptian landscape until a thousand years later, during the Persian occupation.

The Nile itself was a source of an abundance of fish such as tilapia and catfish, both of which were found close to the banks of the river in the muddy waters between the reeds. Nile perch (*Lates nilotica*) was a favoured catch in the irrigation ditches that were dug to channel water from the Nile to the fields.

OVERLEAF: *The view south across the Nile toward the heights of Beni Hasan (compare illustration, opposite page). The cliff face at Beni Hasan contains around 40 Middle Kingdom rock-cut tombs, including several belonging to local nomarchs (provincial governors) of the 11th and 12th dynasties.*

THE UNPREDICTABLE NILE

The flood discharge from the Nile varied enormously from year to year. When floods were very low, there might be severe food shortages, but excessively high floods would wreak catastrophic destruction in villages and fields. Moreover, the floods sometimes arrived too late or too early, and the floodwaters might not retreat until after planting was supposed to have started. A brief inundation could mean that the waters receded quickly, making it difficult to get enough water to the fields before planting time.

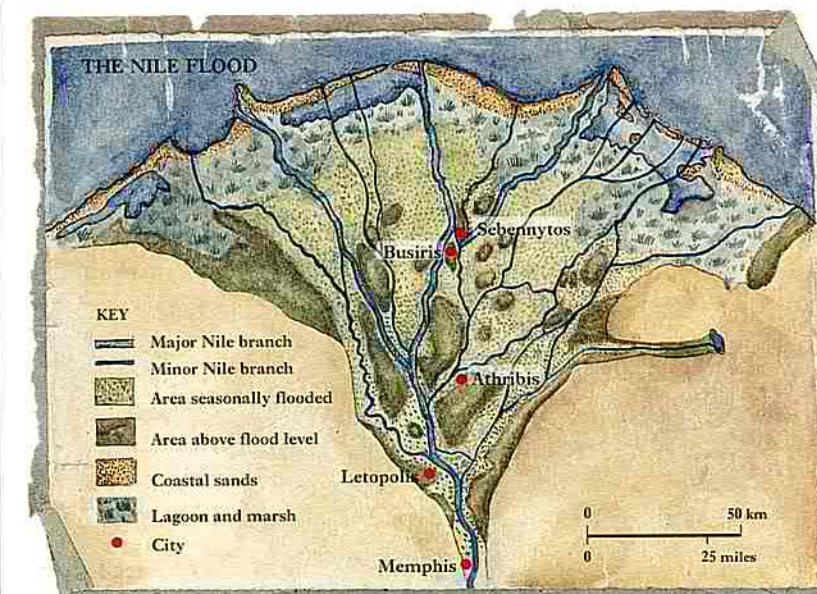
Conditions become particularly difficult when "bad" floods occurred over several successive years. There were

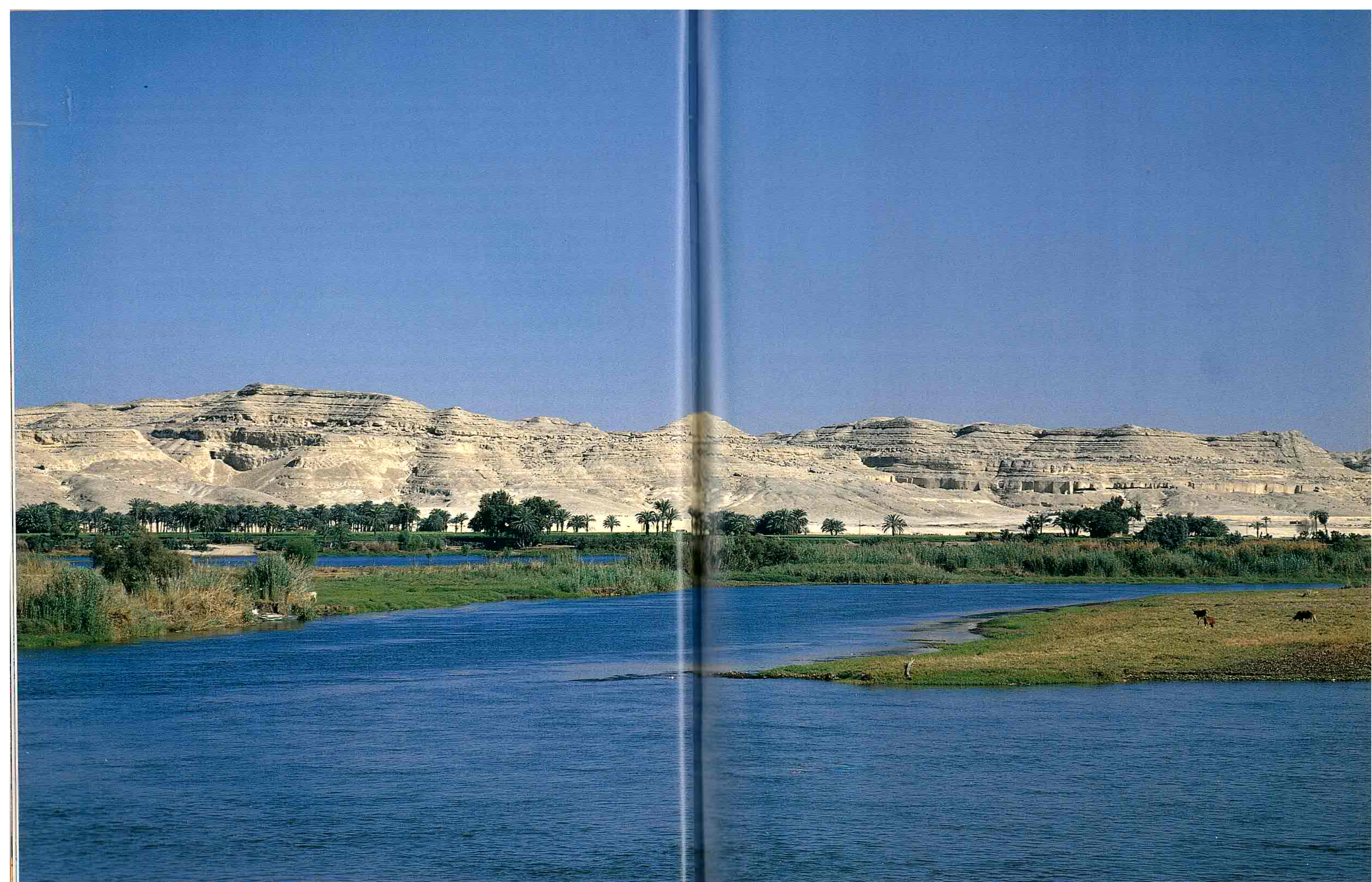
periods when low floods and high floods alternated annually, causing major disruption to planting and harvesting schedules. Repeated low floods also led to the silting of major transport canals and the disappearance of many Delta branches of the Nile (see p.11).

Ancient records are scanty, but those of the Nilometer (Nile flood gauge) at Rhoda near Cairo, over the last thirteen hundred years, reveal that from the early tenth century CE to the late fourteenth century CE the floods were still highly variable, with the periods 930 to 1070 and 1180 to 1350 marked by severe droughts. Times of drought were

accompanied by outbreaks of pestilence and civil disorder, and it is known that some people resorted to cannibalism. It is not known whether such effects occurred in pharaonic times, but according to one theory, poor floods contributed to the demise of the Old Kingdom.

The Nile Delta in ancient times, showing the area subjected to flooding. The often catastrophic variability of the Nile inundation was the chief motivation behind the construction this century of the Aswan Dam and, especially, the Aswan High Dam, completed in 1971.

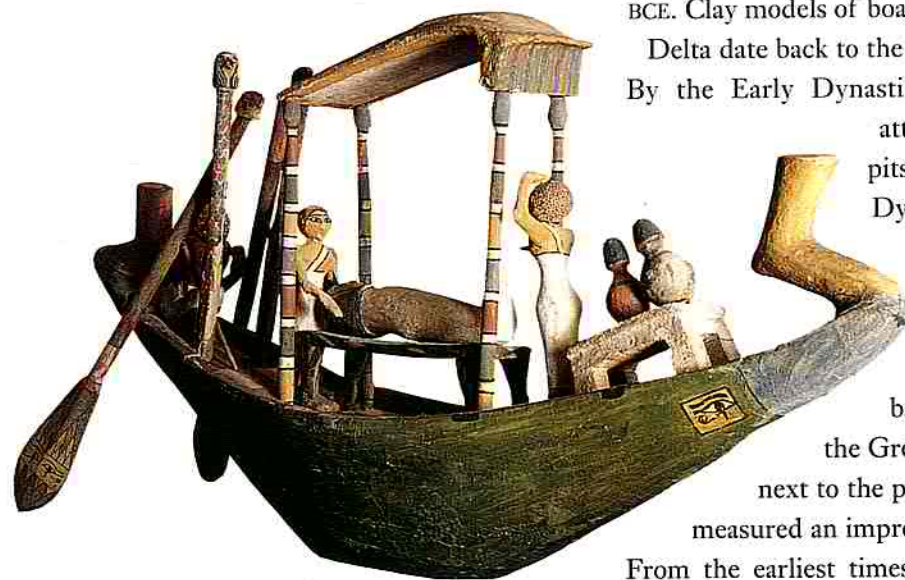




CANALS

Extinct branches of the Nile in the eastern Delta once played a key role in the import of goods into Egypt from the Near East. When the branches began to silt up, they were re-excavated as artificial canals. A major canal east of the Delta is depicted in reliefs showing King Sety I (ca. 1290–1279BCE) crossing the border into Asia. Later, Necho II (ca. 610–595BCE) dug a canal to connect the Nile with the Red Sea (see map, opposite). This waterway was maintained and deepened by the Persians and the Ptolemies. The Greek historian Herodotus remarked that two large ships could navigate the canal side by side. As early as the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2350–2170BCE), the Egyptians also dug a canal at the First Cataract to ease the movement of boats through the rapids. However, during low water, boats had to be hauled out of the river and dragged on land past the cataract. Another canal at the cataract was excavated in the reign of Senwosret III (ca. 1836–1818BCE).

Mourners with a mummy aboard a wooden model boat of unknown provenance; it was placed in a tomb ca. 1900BCE to symbolize a voyage to the sanctuary of Osiris at Abydos.



THE GREAT HIGHWAY

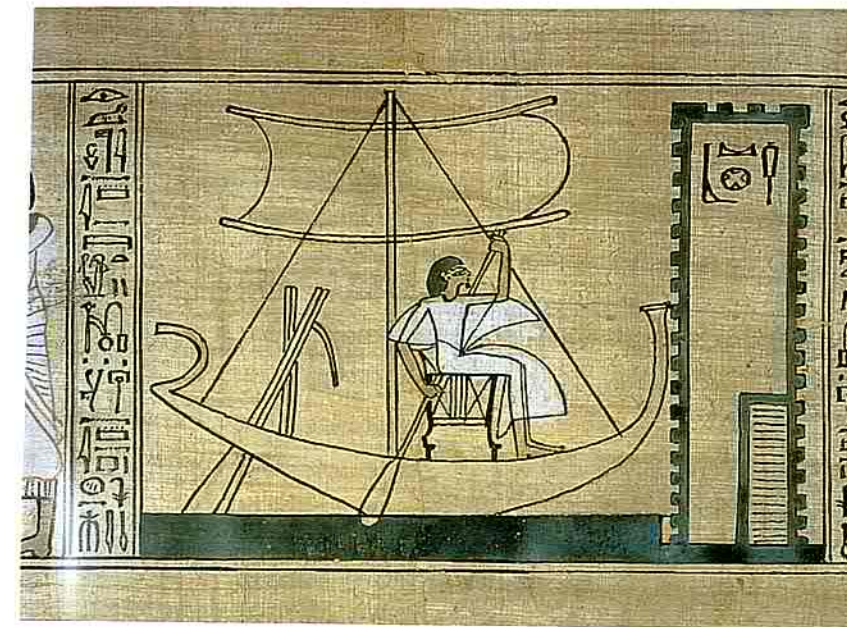
The Nile was at once Egypt's richest source of sustenance and its main communications artery. It flowed from south to north at an average speed of four knots (7.4kph) during the season of inundation, which meant that the voyage from Thebes to Memphis, a distance of around 550 miles (885km), would have taken approximately two weeks. Navigation was faster during the inundation because the water was on average about twenty-five to thirty-three feet (7.5–10m) deep. In contrast, during the season of drought, when the water level was low, the speed of the current was much slower, about one knot (1.8kph), and the same trip would have taken at least two months. At the Nile's lowest point, in June, the water was no more than seven feet (2m) at Aswan compared with just under eighteen feet (5.5m) near Memphis.

The trip from north to south would have been extremely slow before the invention of sails (probably ca. 3350BCE or a little later) to take advantage of the northerly and northwesterly winds blowing off the Mediterranean. At all times of the year the great bend near Qena, where the Nile flows from west to east and then back from east to west, slows down river travel considerably. Night sailing was generally avoided because of the danger of running aground on one of the many sandbanks and low sandy islands (see illustration, p.12).

In the late Predynastic or Naqada II period (ca. 3500–3100BCE), Egyptian boats developed from craft made of reed bundles into big ships constructed from wood planks. Early rock art suggests that some boats were over fifty feet (15m) long and could carry a crew of thirty-two. Multi-oared boats existed before this time, in the early fourth millennium BCE. Clay models of boats found at Merimde Beni Salama in the Delta date back to the fifth millennium BCE.

By the Early Dynastic Period, Egyptian boatbuilding had attained high standards. At Abydos, boat pits (see p.172) associated with a First-Dynasty funerary complex of ca. 3000BCE have revealed a fleet of twelve boats between fifty and sixty feet (15–18m) long. But perhaps the greatest discovery from this period is that of a barque of the pharaoh Khufu, builder of the Great Pyramid (see p.158). Buried in pieces next to the pyramid, it was recently reassembled and measured an impressive 144 feet (43.8m) in length.

From the earliest times, boats were used to transport people



A scene from the Book of the Dead of the priest Chensumose showing him sailing on the waters of the underworld in a vessel.

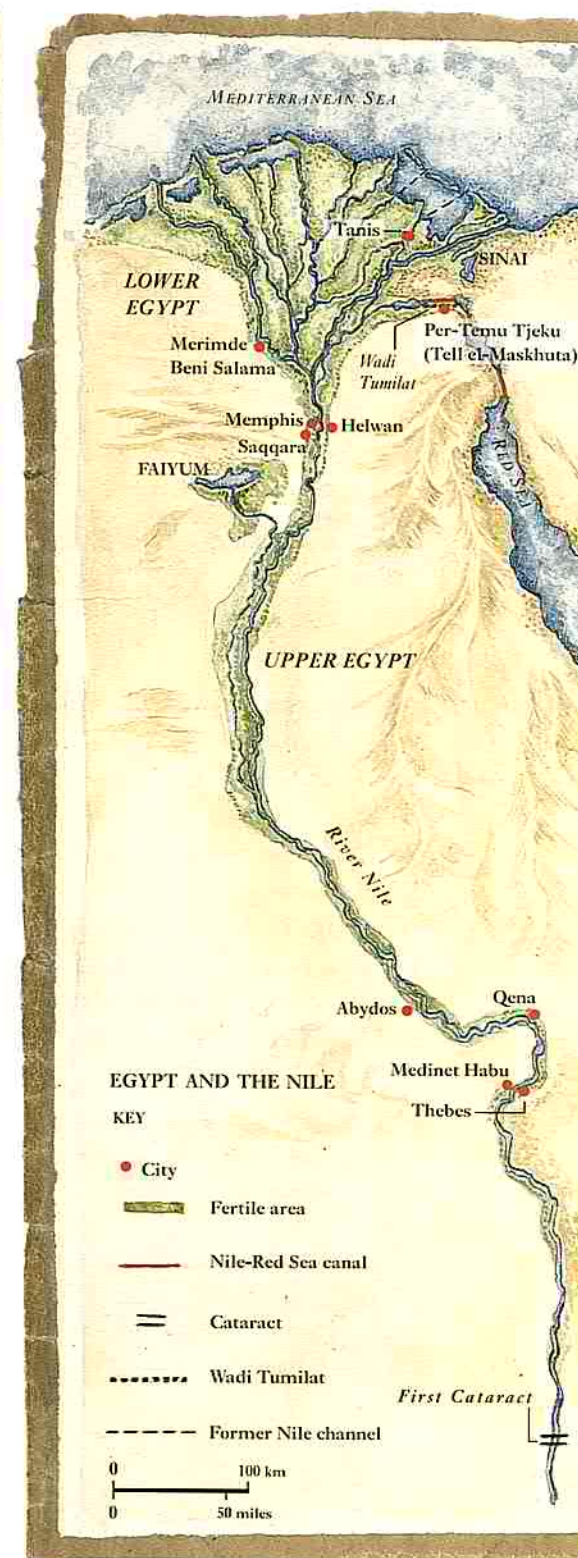
resembling a small Nile skiff rigged to catch the Nile's prevailing northerly winds. Twenty-First Dynasty (ca. 1075–945BCE).

between villages during the inundations, to ferry them across the river, and to transport cattle, grain and other commodities. They were also deployed in military campaigns. From the Fifth Dynasty onward, Egyptian shipwrights were making sailing boats capable of ocean navigation.

Together with the donkey – the principal overland transport – boats made possible the economic and political integration of the country. The capitals of the nomes, or provinces (see p.27), were linked with the national capital by boats and barges that carried local revenues to the royal storehouses. The emergence of a royal state in Egypt may have been linked with the coordination of grain collection and other relief activities developed as part of a strategy to deal with unexpected crop failures in a particular district. In pharaonic times, grain from several districts stored in a central granary would be sent by river to an area hit by famine.

Artificial harbours and ports to accommodate large cargo boats were an essential feature of the riverine landscape. Towns took advantage of the deeper side of the Nile channel close to the shore to establish ports. They also built rock jetties that extended a short way into the river, perhaps in response to changes in the course of the Nile. The site of a huge harbour at Medinet Habu in Western Thebes, built during the reign of Amenhotep III (ca. 1390–1353BCE), is marked by huge elongated mounds created by the earth from the harbour's excavation.

Other large harbours are known from Memphis and the Delta city of Tanis. The port at Tanis was used by Thutmose III (ca. 1479–1425BCE) to connect Memphis with the eastern Delta.



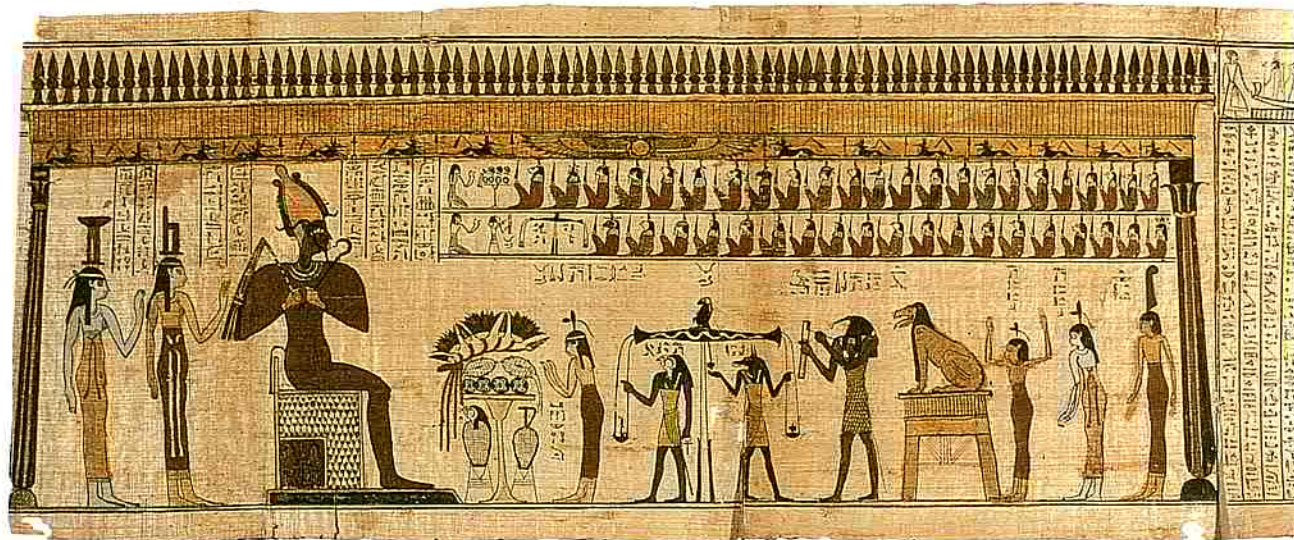
A LANDSCAPE OF THE MIND

The unpredictability of the Nile floods (see p.13) exercised a powerful hold on the Egyptian imagination. The period just before the inundation, when the river was so low that in places a person could cross on foot, was a time of apprehension: when the flood came it was frequently wild and dangerous. The Egyptians could not tame the river, but they sought to prevent its worst effects by managing the landscape to take advantage of natural conditions – for example, by strengthening natural levees to form embankments. At times of low floods, artificial canals carried water to the thirsty uplands of the floodplain. Flood basins were managed so that water could flow from one basin to another, enabling areas up and down the valley to have sufficient water in time for planting. The desire for order which permeated the Egyptians' world-view was surely derived in no small measure from the chaotic presence of the river in their midst.

To the Egyptians, every being, including Pharaoh and the gods, had to abide by the fundamental cosmic principle of *ma'at*, personified as Ma'at, the goddess of order, justice and goodness. The cosmic order was also embodied in the movement of the god Re, the sun, the other prominent natural element whose rhythms regulated Egyptian lives. The sun god was believed to be ferried daily across the sky in a boat, and to return through the underworld on a barque to a point below the eastern horizon (see pp.118–19). Such mythological vessels recalled the ferryboats that plied between the banks of the Nile.

On earth, order was maintained by the pharaoh, the manifestation of the god Horus, son of Osiris and Isis (see pp.134–5). According to allusions in early religious texts, and later literary and artistic references, Osiris taught the people how to take advantage of the Nile by giving them

The weighing of the heart (see p.137) before the god Osiris, whose face was depicted green (now discoloured by time) because of his association with the growth of crops and the annual renewal of the land by the Nile. In this scene from the Book of the Dead of Nefer-Is (ca. 350 BCE), he is presented with offerings representing Egypt's bounty.



the arts of cultivation and civilization. He was slain by his brother, Seth, who was identified with the forces of evil and chaos. After death, Osiris returned to life as king of the underworld, where he ordained the life-giving waters of the annual inundation.

Egyptian concepts of time were based on the daily rising and setting of the sun and the three-part cycle of the Nile: drought; the season in between; and the season of inundation. Cosmic space was delimited by the four corners: the south (the source of the Nile), the north (where the pole star shone), the east (where the sun rose) and the west (where it set). Time and space were thus linked to the two most important elements in Egyptian cosmology; and these elements, in turn, were linked in the cosmic order with life, death and rebirth.

DEITIES OF THE NILE

Although Osiris ordained the annual inundation, the god most associated with the river itself was Hapi, depicted as a human figure with a large belly and pendulous breasts. This corpulence represented the bounties of the Nile, whose waters flowed to nurture Egypt. Hymns addressed to the Nile spoke of its bounty, expressing joy at its coming, and sorrow at the plight of Egypt when the Nile floods failed. The inundation was ritually greeted with thanks and jubilation in honour of Hapi, its patron divinity. The god is depicted with a papyrus plant, another symbol of the benefits of the Nile, sprouting from the top of his head.

The Nile was a river of creative forces. Its source was believed to be in the underworld, where it was connected to a subterranean stream. From the underworld it issued to the surface between granite rocks close to the First Cataract near Elephantine in the far south. As



the fount of Egypt's fertility, the (supposed) source of the Nile was linked to the ram-headed creator god Khnum, who was believed to have fashioned humankind from Nile mud on a potter's wheel. Satis, the consort of Khnum in the south, together with her companion Anuket, were often depicted pouring water onto the earth to endow it

with life. Unlike Khnum, she was shown in human form wearing the crown of Upper Egypt with two gazelle horns.

ABOVE: A fragment of coloured glass depicting Hapi, the god associated with the Nile inundation; Greco-Roman Period, 3rd century BCE–1st century CE.
BELOW: A relief from the 5th-Dynasty tomb of Mereruka depicting a hunt in the Nile papyrus beds. Several of the creatures have divine associations, such as the crocodile, hippopotami, fishes and ibises.



Nile creatures, such as the hippopotamus, the crocodile and fish, were venerated as gods of fertility. Heket, a frog, was revered as a goddess of child-birth, as was the hippopotamus goddess, Taweret. In the story of Isis and Osiris, Heket was said to have assisted Isis in bringing the murdered Osiris briefly back to life, in order that he could father the god Horus (see main text).