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# Monarchs *of the* Nile

Second Edition

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# I The Land and its People

The modern Arab Republic of Egypt (A.R.E.) occupies 992,000 square kilometres of the north-east corner of the African continent. However, only a tiny proportion – 4% – of the territory is inhabited. A small number of the population live in the oases of the Western Desert, but the overwhelming majority live in a narrow strip bordering the River Nile. Indeed, it is as this strip of land that Egypt has of old been defined, the two being so nearly synonymous.

This fertile band divides into two distinct elements. In the south, the cultivable area varies in width from nothing to a number of kilometres, beyond which it gives way to low desert that rapidly rises up to the arid plateaus of the Eastern (Arabian) and Western (Libyan) Deserts. In contrast, the Delta, beginning just north of modern Cairo, spreads out in a great triangle towards the Mediterranean, with kilometre upon kilometre of flat, fertile land, criss-crossed by canals and wholly dissimilar to the valley in both appearance and ethos.

Traditionally, the ancient Egyptian state was held to have extended from the shores of the Mediterranean to Aswan; however, at many points in its history, it reached far south into Nubia, encompassing the southern part of the A.R.E. and the northern part of the Democratic Republic of the Sudan. This section of the Nile, now lost below the waters of Lake Nasser, created by the building of the High Dam at Aswan, was far more barren than that further north, and mainly of interest as a source of raw materials and a trade-route to the far south. Communication south of Aswan was hindered by a series of cataracts, or rapids, the First just above that city, the Sixth and last just below modern Khartoum.

It has become the ultimate Egyptian cliché to describe Egypt as being the 'gift of the Nile', a phrase coined by the Greek writer

Hecetaeus, and almost universally mis-attributed to the famous traveller Herodotus, who visited Egypt around 450 B.C.. By this he meant that without the river, the country and its civilization would not – could not – have existed in anything like the form that is so well known. Outside the margins of the river and the handful of oases, the country is desert, incapable of supporting a sedentary population, and inhabited solely by nomads, whose modern representatives are the *bedouin*.

Today, agriculture in Egypt is predicated upon perennial irrigation, made possible by a series of dams built across the river since the beginning of the twentieth century. However, until this change in the river regime, the growing of crops depended on the annual, natural, inundation of the Nile. In summer, rains in the Ethiopian highlands swell the river's tributaries, the Atbara and Blue Nile; today, this merely restocks Lake Nasser, but in the past, it led to the flooding of the Nile valley and delta, an inundation given divine personification as Hapy. The water, covering all of the agricultural land, receded in October/November, leaving behind on the fields a rich layer of alluvium. In this, crops were planted, ready for the harvest in March/April, with little or no watering required in the interim.

So fundamental to the Egyptian way of life was this cycle that the three calendrical seasons were named *Akhet* (Inundation), *Peret* (Growing) and *Shemu* (Drought). Each was divided into four thirty-day months, added to which were five festival-days, together making up a civil year of 365 days. The lack of a leap-year, to take into account the 365 $\frac{1}{4}$ -day solar year, meant that the calendar gradually slipped until the season-names bore no relation to the agricultural cycle; only after 1,460 years did the seasons and calendar slip back into synchronization..

Agriculture was the principal occupation of the Egyptian population, based upon small villages, dotted up and down the river. The nature of the inundation system meant that, apart from the period after the rising of the water, when dykes would have to be maintained to prevent the water from leaving the fields too early, or flooding habitations, and the physical sowing and harvesting of crops, work was rather easier than under perennial cultivation methods: on the other hand, it meant that men could more easily be diverted to labour on public works, as they

frequently were. The fairly low ancient population in pharaonic times, no more than four or five million, additionally meant that agriculture did not need to be particularly intensive to provide for adequate sustenance, plus a surplus – particularly for the taxes which were needed to support the many activities of the State.

Land was worked by a wide variety of private individuals and state organizations. Prominent amongst the latter were the temples, which owned huge areas of arable and grazing land, together with livestock and the tied labour to work it. The produce went towards the offerings to the deity, paying his or her priests, and part-funding building and restoration costs, together with the wide variety of activities which focussed on a cult centre.

While the state cults – Amun of Thebes, Ptah of Memphis, Re of Heliopolis, and many more – had large full-time staffs, the far

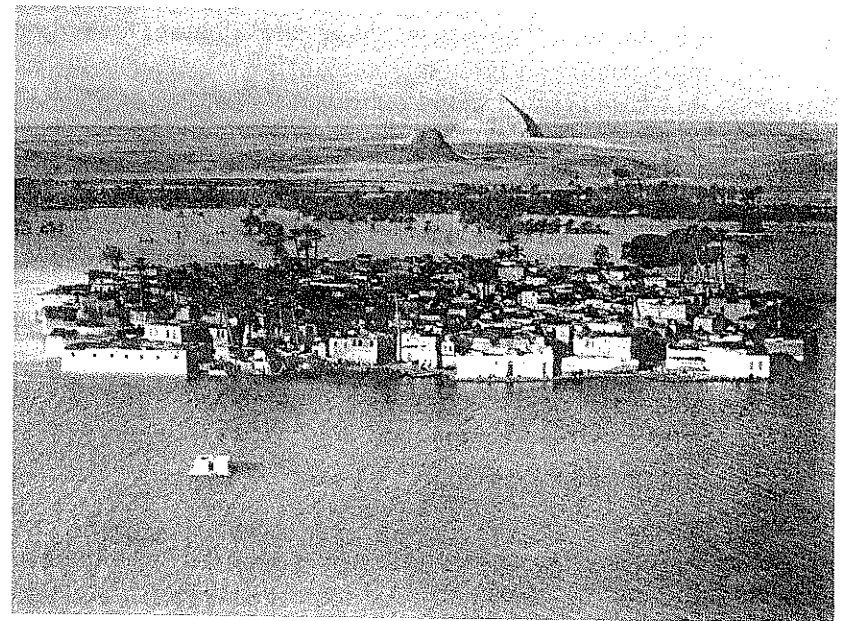


Fig. 1. The Nile inundation at Dahshur: in the background are the ruined 'Black Pyramid' of Ammenemes III and the 'Bent Pyramid' of Seneferu.

more numerous local deities often had their shrines manned on a part-time basis, whereby local people of a certain standing spent a number of months of the year serving as their god's priesthood. Thus, a priest will frequently also have been a farmer, a scribe, a soldier or a craftsman: religion was just one of a person's civic duties, rather than a specific vocation.

This rather effectively characterises the all-pervading nature of ancient Egyptian religion: rather like Islam, it was bound up in a way of life, making it very difficult to separate out the sacred and the profane. Personal piety was far more concerned with a person's own relationship with his or her preferred god than the massive ceremonial that surrounded the state gods. Indeed, the latter was a wholly different facet of man's relationship with the divine sphere, being more part of the magical maintenance of the universe than the simple giving of praise and offering of prayers. Where the two aspects might coincide was in the area of oracles. On festival days, the cult-statue of the deity would be carried out of his or her temple in procession, and individuals might place petitions before the image, to which the god would indicate assent or rejection.

Local government was carried out by councils, the *kenbut*, comprising the more prominent individuals of the area, with functions both administrative and judicial. Throughout historic times, the country was divided into provinces (nomes), their numbers varying at different periods. At particular points in Egyptian history, they were key administrative units; at others, they seem to have been little more than nominal groupings of towns. The other important administrative division was between the Nile valley and its delta. At certain times, each half of the country might have a discrete body of officials; in periods of disorder, the two elements had a tendency to become independent polities.

The population of Egypt has always been mixed, varied racial types, ranging from the light skin-tones of the north to the dark brown seen in the far south. Negroid features are to be found in the areas of the ancient kingdom that penetrated deep into the modern Sudan. In addition to the indigenous population, the country was subject to considerable immigration, peaceful and warlike, particularly into the north-east Delta – as witnessed by the Bible stories of Abraham and Joseph. By later times, Egypt

was thus a fairly cosmopolitan society, with foreign gods worshipped in a number of centres, and men of foreign extraction holding senior government and military positions.

The position of women in Egyptian society seems generally to have been much higher than usual in ancient civilizations; although restricted in the range of occupations open to them, they appear to have been fully competent at law – i.e. without a need to be under the tutelage of a male – and in some instances, literate. While the known examples of female pharaohs are exceptional, that they were able to hold the throne at all bears witness to the status of women.

Based upon the prominence of the funerary monuments of the Egyptians, modern popular opinion generally holds the view that they were a gloomy folk, obsessed with death and the preparations for it. However, even the most superficial study of the available material gives the lie to this: it is quite clear that the Egyptian character was fully the opposite. Their funerary preparations were rather a manifestation of a desire to prolong earthly life into eternity: Heaven was seen quite simply as a bigger, better, Egypt. There can be few more satisfactory endorsements of a society than for its citizens to desire its indefinite continuity.