

Egypt: Gift of the Nile

Ancient Egypt was a great civilization that arose more than 5,000 years ago. Modern Egypt is one of the most powerful and most influential countries of the Arab world. In both ancient and modern times, the Nile River has been the source of Egypt's prosperity. The Nile has brought Egypt good fortune, wealth, and power.

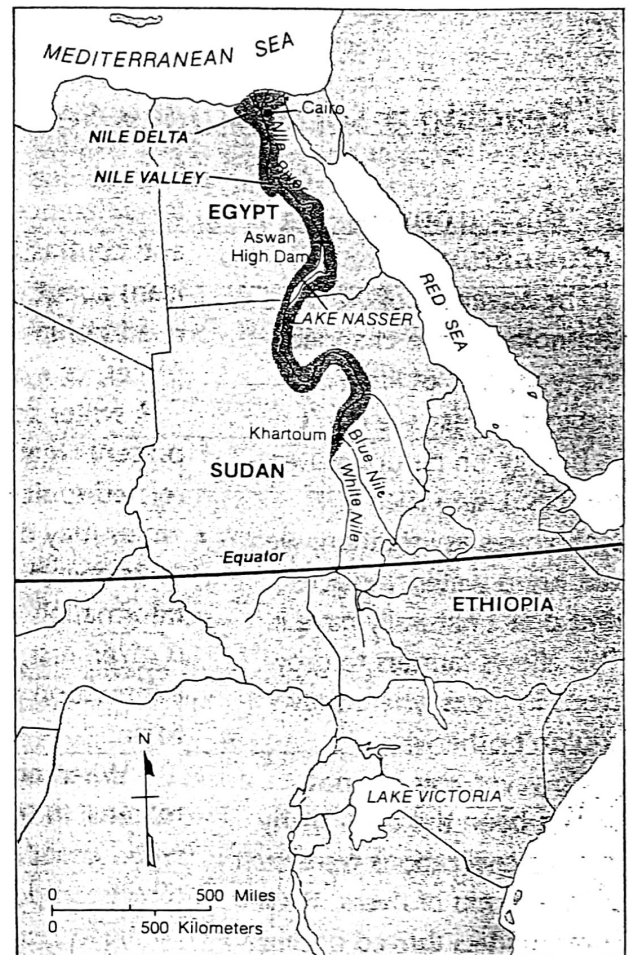
The Nile River: Giver of Life

The Nile is the longest river in the world. From its source in the mountains of central Africa to its mouth at the Mediterranean Sea, the river flows northward for almost 4,150 miles (6,640 kilometers). Lake Victoria in Tanzania feeds one branch of the river. This branch is called the White Nile because of the color of the limestone particles that it carries. Another branch of the Nile begins in the highlands of Ethiopia. It is called the Blue Nile because its pure water reflects the color of the sky. These two branches meet at Khartoum (kar TOOM) in Sudan.

As the river flows north, it crosses 950 miles (1,520 kilometers) of Egypt's barren desert land. In the far south of Egypt, the Aswan (ahz WAHN) High Dam, built across the river, has been a major factor in controlling the waters of the Nile. Behind the dam lies Lake Nasser (NAS ə r), a huge lake created by engineers.

From the Aswan High Dam north to Cairo, the river winds through the desert, supporting life along its banks and farming in the Nile Valley. Fertile strips of land lie on both sides of the Nile. These strips of land, sometimes as wide as 14 miles (22.4 kilometers) or as narrow as 3 miles (4.8 kilometers), support nearly half of Egypt's population.

At Cairo, Egypt's capital and Africa's largest city, the Nile fans out into a fertile triangle of small tributaries and streams. This area is called the delta of the Nile. Stretching 90 miles (144 kilometers) from Cairo to the Mediterranean Sea, the delta is 150 miles (240 kilometers) wide at the coast. Yet, this small area of rich land supports the other half of the nation's population. In fact, the valley



The Nile River irrigates long, narrow strips of land along its banks.

and the delta of the Nile together support almost the entire Egyptian population. Of Egypt's 386,000 square miles (1,003,600 square kilometers), only one-thirtieth is inhabited.

Ancient Egypt and the Nile

The Nile River enabled the ancient Egyptians not only to survive but also to develop an advanced civilization. Because the Nile brought water into the parched desert, the people there could grow crops and raise livestock. The river was also an essential artery for travel, communication, and trade.

Early Agriculture During a visit to Egypt, the Greek historian Herodotus declared that the land was "wholly the gift of the Nile." Every year, the ancient Egyptian

farmer worked the land according to seasons that were based on the flow of the Nile. From June to September was the Flood. During this time, the Nile reached its highest level, flooding the irrigation systems that the farmers built. As the flood waters subsided, they deposited a rich, black silt. This layer of fertile earth left behind by the flood waters was planted and the crops harvested during the second season. Known as the Emergence, this season lasted from October to February. The last season from March to May was called the Drought. During this hot, dry season, nothing grew.

Wheat, the most important crop for the ancient Egyptian farmer, was used to make bread and to fatten cattle. Small plots of land were also planted with vegetables, such as beans, onions, garlic, and lentils. In addition to food, flax and papyrus reed grew along the banks of the Nile. Flax was used to make clothing and papyrus reed to make paper.

✓ Farmers developed systems of ditches and basins to trap the river's water. They invented water wheels to carry water from the river to the land. They learned to estimate the time and height of the Nile's floods. Yet, the river was still beyond their control. Some years it rose to enormous heights, washing away homes and killing livestock. Other years it did not flood at all, bringing famine to the land. This acute and general shortage of food often resulted in starvation and misery.

Transportation and Trade For the early Egyptians, the Nile was a natural highway that linked the villages along its banks. The Nile was so important that even the language of ancient Egypt reflected the river's influence. The word for *travel* was either *khed*, to go downstream, or *khent*, to go upstream.

To travel on the Nile, the Egyptians built sailboats, called feluccas (fə LUK əs). Because the river flowed from south to north, these small, narrow boats could follow the river's current northward. Because the winds of the Mediterranean Sea blew north to south, the feluccas were propelled southward by their triangular sails. Routinely, merchants sailed from village to village with their wares, while grain barges floated north to the delta. During the construction of the great pyramids, river barges carried heavy stones to building sites.

The river also provided Egypt with a major route for trade with other countries. Egyptian traders sailed the Nile to do business with merchants from Syria and Mesopotamia (mes ə pə TAY mee ə). The Nile was a lifeline of commerce.

Modern Egypt and the Nile

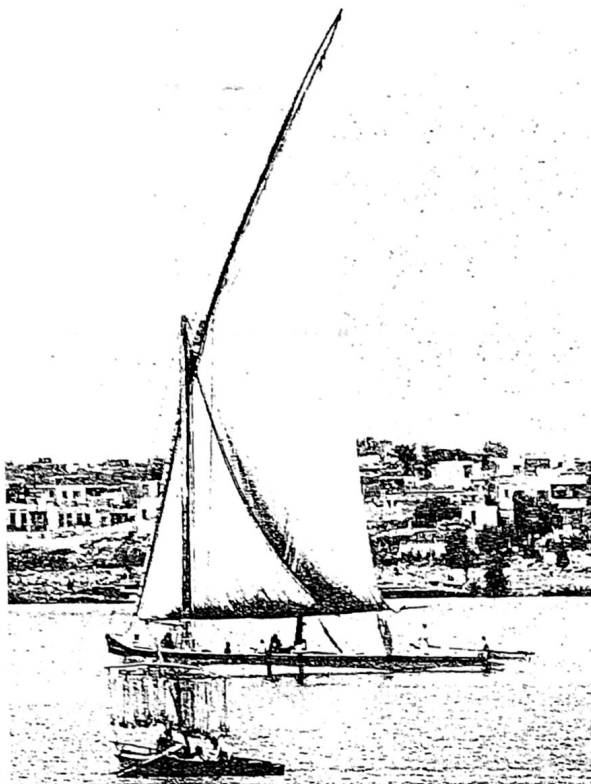
The Nile is still the country's primary resource. Egypt's rapidly growing population remains concentrated along the Nile River valley and delta. However, the Aswan High Dam, completed in 1970, has changed the relationship between the Nile River and the Egyptian people. Not only has it affected farming in the Nile River valley, but it has also revolutionized the country's economy.

Modern Agriculture Built across the Nile River in southern Egypt, the Aswan High Dam now controls the mighty river. Lake Nasser, extending 300 miles (480 kilometers) behind the dam into Sudan, collects the river water that the dam holds back.

The dam has affected Egypt's agriculture in several ways. The dam holds back the river during the high-water season, releasing the water in a constant flow to the north. Thus the dam has eliminated the annual flood and drought cycle along the Nile Valley. During several dry years in the 1970s, the dam provided Nile water to irrigate farmland and thereby prevented widespread famine.

Farmers can now rely on a steady, year-round supply of water to their land. To make use of the Nile's changed flow, new irrigation systems have been built. Modern diesel pumps bring the river water to the land, and large, heavy-duty tractors till and plant the earth. However, in some places, Egypt's farming traditions remain unchanged. Some farmers still turn the soil with ancient plows and irrigate the land with water wheels.

In modern times, cotton has become Egypt's most important crop. In fact, Egypt leads the world in cotton production. Cotton plants, which cannot survive floods, require a steady supply of water. The Aswan High Dam has, therefore, made cotton growing possible. In recent years, the Egyptian government has encouraged farmers to grow other crops, as well as cotton. Today Egypt also produces beans, corn, rice, sugar cane, and wheat.



In Egypt today, the feluccas have been replaced by more modern boats and steamers. However, these ancient vessels carry goods and people along the Nile today much as their ancestors did 4,000 years ago.

✕ The Aswan High Dam has also caused some problems for the Egyptian farmer. Besides water, the dam now holds back the rich silt that the Nile floods used to carry into the river valley. Because this silt was rich in

nutrients, it acted as a natural fertilizer for crops. Now, farmers have to enrich the soil with costly chemical fertilizers. The absence of silt is also seriously damaging the environment by causing the erosion of land along the Mediterranean coast near the Nile. In addition, the year-round plantings deplete the land, further reducing the soil's fertility.

Transportation, Commerce, and Industry
The Nile is still Egypt's most convenient means of transportation. Feluccas like those of ancient times still sail up and down the river. In addition, the barges and steamers that carry much of Egypt's commercial freight clog the great waterway. Construction materials, iron ore, agricultural products, and industrial equipment are all transported along the Nile. A network of highways and railroads also crisscrosses the Nile Valley.

In recent years, the power of the Nile has been harnessed for uses other than agriculture. Generators at the Aswan High Dam have tripled Egypt's output of electricity. This increased output has revolutionized Egypt's manufacturing capability. Electric power is vital to industrial production and has helped the country develop as a modern nation.

From ancient times to modern, Egypt has prospered. The Nile River has given the Egyptian people the gift of water and thereby the gift of life.

RECALLING FACTS

1. Sequence the following items in the order of the ancient Egyptian seasons.

- ___ Drought—time of dryness
- ___ Flood—time of high water
- ___ Emergence—time of planting

2. How did the Aswan High Dam prevent famine in Egypt during the dry years of the 1970s?

3. Write two causes for the following effect.

Cause _____

Cause _____

Effect Egyptian farmers now need to fertilize their soil.