

Geography and Ancient Egypt

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Egypt was called the gift of the Nile because the Nile River gave life to the desert.
2. Civilization developed along the Nile after people began farming in this region.
3. Strong kings unified all of Egypt.

The Big Idea

The water, fertile soils, and protected setting of the Nile Valley allowed a great civilization to arise in Egypt around 3200 BC.

Key Terms and People

cataracts, p. 87

delta, p. 87

Menes, p. 89

pharaoh, p. 89

dynasty, p. 89



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TAKING NOTES

Use the graphic organizer online to take notes on characteristics of the Nile River and the way it affected Egypt.

If YOU were there...

Your family are farmers in the Nile Valley. Each year when the river's floodwaters spread rich soil on the land, you help your father plant barley. When you are not in the fields, you spin fine linen thread from flax you have grown. Sometimes you and your friends hunt birds in the tall grasses along the riverbanks.

Why do you like living in the Nile Valley?

BUILDING BACKGROUND Mesopotamia was not the only place where an advanced civilization grew up along a great river. The narrow valley of the Nile River in Egypt also provided fertile land that drew people to live there. The culture that developed in Egypt was more stable and long-lasting than those in Mesopotamia.

The Gift of the Nile

Geography played a key role in the development of Egyptian civilization. The Nile River brought life to Egypt. The river was so important to people in this region that the Greek historian Herodotus (hi-RAHD-du-tus) called Egypt the gift of the Nile.

Location and Physical Features

The Nile is the longest river in the world. It begins in central Africa and runs 4,000 miles north to the Mediterranean Sea. Egyptian civilization developed along a 750-mile stretch of the Nile in northern Africa.

Ancient Egypt included two regions, a southern region and a northern region. The southern region was called Upper Egypt. It was so named because it was located upriver in relation to the Nile's flow. Lower Egypt, the northern region, was located downriver. The Nile sliced through the desert of Upper Egypt. There, it created a fertile river valley about 13 miles wide. On either side of the Nile lay hundreds of miles of bleak desert.

As you can see on the map to the right, the Nile rushed through rocky, hilly land south of Egypt. At several points, this terrain caused **cataracts**, or **strong rapids**, to form. The first cataract, 720 miles south of the Mediterranean, marked the southern border of Upper Egypt. Five more cataracts lay farther south. These rapids made sailing that portion of the Nile very difficult.

In Lower Egypt, the Nile divided into several branches that fanned out and flowed into the Mediterranean Sea. These branches formed a **delta**, a **triangle-shaped area of land made of soil deposited by a river**. In ancient times, swamps and marshes covered much of the Nile Delta. Some two thirds of Egypt's fertile farmland was located in the Nile Delta.

The Floods of the Nile

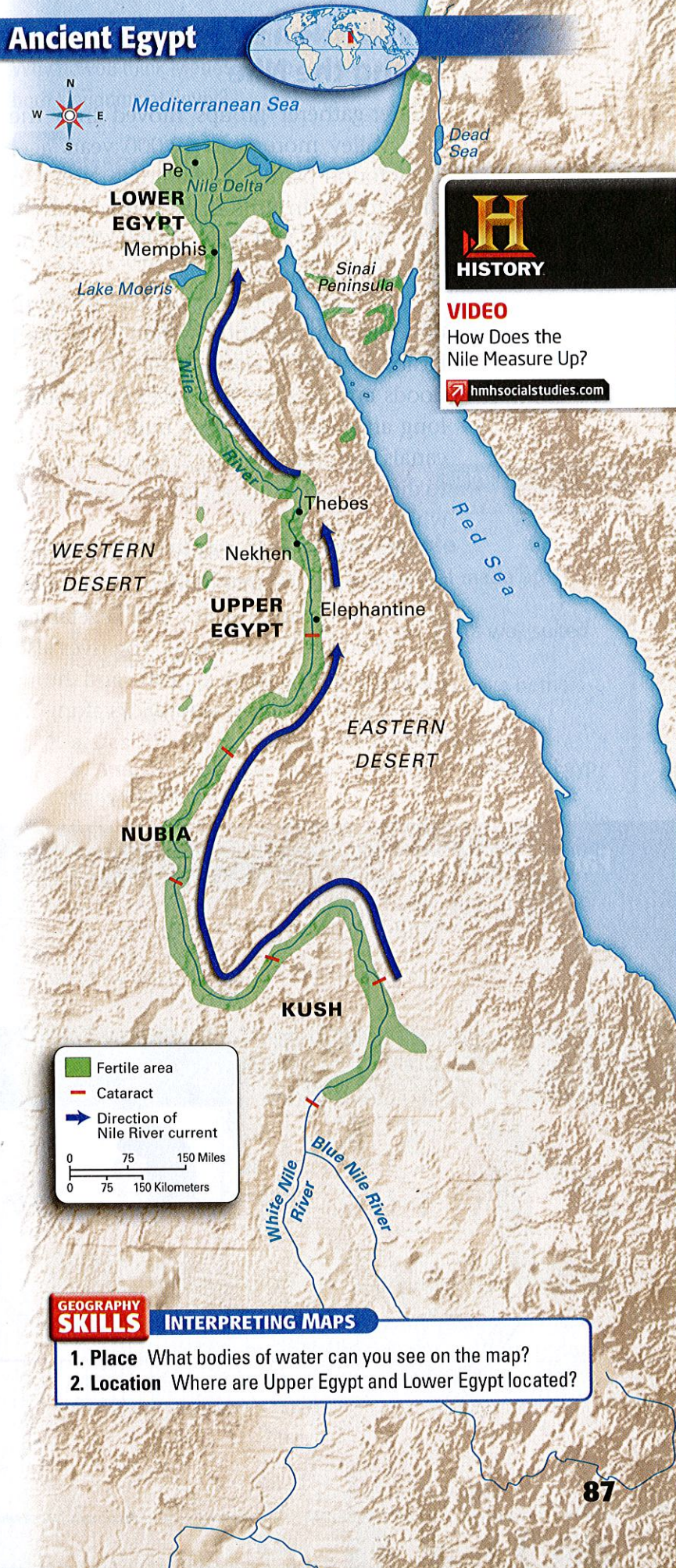
Because it received so little rain, most of Egypt was desert. Each year, however, rain-fall far to the south of Egypt in the highlands of east Africa caused the Nile to flood. The Nile floods were easier to predict than those of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia. Almost every year, the Nile flooded Upper Egypt in midsummer and Lower Egypt in the fall, coating the land around the river with a rich silt.

The silt from the Nile made the soil ideal for farming. The silt also made the land a dark color. That is why the Egyptians called their country the black land. They called the dry, lifeless desert beyond the river valley the red land.

Each year, Egyptians eagerly awaited the flooding of the Nile. For them the river's floods were a life-giving miracle. Without the floods, people never could have settled in Egypt.

READING CHECK Summarizing Why was Egypt called the gift of the Nile?

Ancient Egypt



VIDEO

How Does the Nile Measure Up?

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GEOGRAPHY SKILLS

INTERPRETING MAPS

- 1. Place** What bodies of water can you see on the map?
- 2. Location** Where are Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt located?

Civilization Develops Along the Nile

Hunter-gatherer groups moved into the Nile Valley more than 12,000 years ago. They found plants, wild animals, and fish there to eat. In time these people learned how to farm, and they settled along the Nile in small villages.

As in Mesopotamia, farmers in Egypt developed an irrigation system. They built basins to collect water during the yearly floods and to store this precious resource long afterward. They also built a series of canals that could be used in the dry months to direct water from the basins to the fields where it was needed.

The Nile provided early Egyptian farmers with an abundance of food. The farmers grew wheat, barley, fruits, and vegetables, and raised cattle and sheep. The river also provided many types of fish, and hunters trapped wild geese and ducks along its

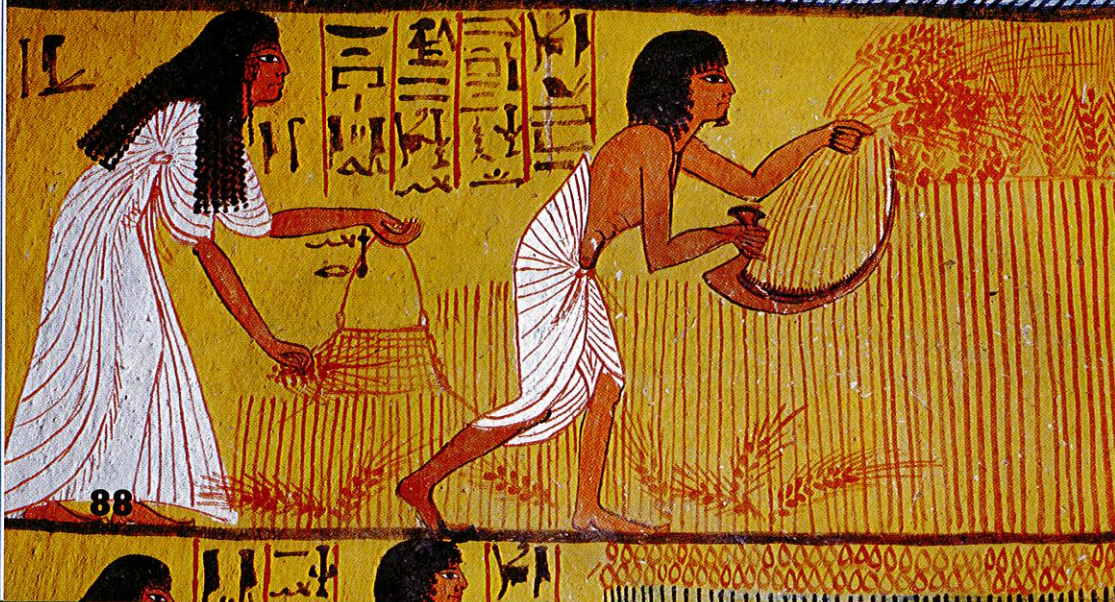
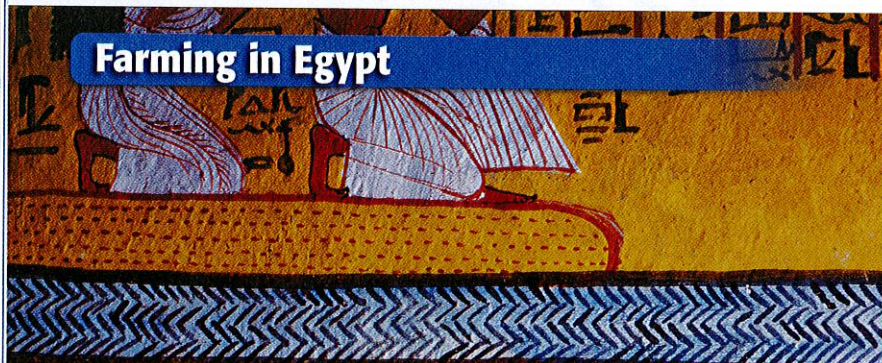
banks. Like the Mesopotamians, Egyptians enjoyed a varied diet.

In addition to a stable food supply, the Nile Valley offered another valuable advantage. It had natural barriers that made Egypt hard to invade. The desert to the west was too big and harsh to cross. To the north, the Mediterranean Sea kept many enemies away. The Red Sea provided protection against invasion as well. Cataracts in the Nile made it difficult for outsiders to sail in from the south.

Protected from invaders, the villages of Egypt grew. Wealthy farmers emerged as village leaders, and strong leaders gained control over several villages. By 3200 BC, the villages had banded together and developed into two kingdoms. One was called Lower Egypt and the other was called Upper Egypt.

READING CHECK Summarizing What attracted early settlers to the Nile Valley?

Farming in Egypt



Farmers in ancient Egypt learned how to grow wheat and barley. This tomb painting shows a couple harvesting their crop (left). Farmers in Egypt still use the fertile lands along the Nile River to grow food (above).

Kings Unify Egypt

The king of Lower Egypt ruled from a town called Pe. He wore a red crown to symbolize his authority. Nekhen was the capital city of Upper Egypt. In this kingdom, the king wore a cone-shaped white crown.

Around 3100 BC a leader named **Menes** (MEE-neeZ) rose to power in Upper Egypt. He sought to finish what an earlier king, called Scorpion, had started. He wanted to unify Upper and Lower Egypt.

The armies of Menes invaded and took control of Lower Egypt. Menes then united the two kingdoms. He married a princess from Lower Egypt to strengthen his control over the unified country. As Egypt's ruler, Menes wore both the white crown of Upper Egypt and the red crown of Lower Egypt. This symbolized his leadership over the two kingdoms. Later, he combined the two crowns into a double crown.

Historians consider Menes to be Egypt's first **pharaoh** (FEHR-oh), the title used by the rulers of Egypt. The title *pharaoh* means "great house." Menes also founded Egypt's first dynasty. A **dynasty** is a series of rulers from the same family.

Menes built a new capital city at the southern tip of the Nile Delta. The city was later named Memphis. For centuries, Memphis was the political and cultural center of Egypt. Many government offices were located there, and the city bustled with artistic activity.

The First Dynasty lasted for about 200 years. Pharaohs who came after Menes also wore the double crown to symbolize their rule over Upper and Lower Egypt. They extended Egyptian territory southward along the Nile and into southwest Asia. Eventually, however, rivals appeared to challenge the First Dynasty for power. These challengers took over Egypt and established the Second Dynasty.

READING CHECK Drawing Inferences

Why do you think Menes wanted to rule over both kingdoms of Egypt?

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW Civilization in ancient Egypt began in the fertile, protected Nile River Valley. People there formed two kingdoms that were later united under one ruler. In the next section, you will learn how Egypt grew and changed under later rulers in a period known as the Old Kingdom.

Section 1 Assessment



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ONLINE QUIZ

Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People

- a. Recall** What were the two regions that made up ancient Egypt?

b. Make Inferences Why was the Nile Delta well suited for settlement?

c. Predict How might the Nile's **cataracts** have both helped and hurt Egypt?
- a. Describe** What foods did the Egyptians eat?

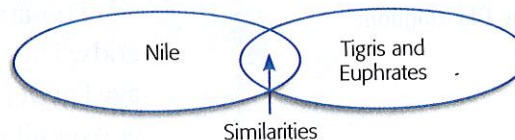
b. Analyze What role did the Nile play in supplying Egyptians with these foods?

c. Elaborate How did the desert on both sides of the Nile help ancient Egypt?
- a. Identify** Who was the first **pharaoh** of Egypt?

b. Draw Conclusions Why did the pharaohs of the First Dynasty wear a double crown?

Critical Thinking

- Comparing and Contrasting** Use your notes on the Nile River to complete a Venn diagram like the one shown. List the differences and similarities between the Nile River in Egypt and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia.



FOCUS ON WRITING

- Thinking about Geography and Early History** In this section, you read about Egypt's geography and early history. What could you put into your riddle about geography and historical events that would be a clue to the answer?