



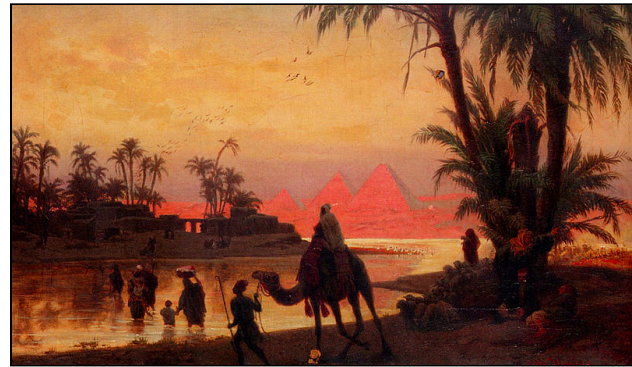
Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

## Developing Civilization in Ancient Egypt

By USHistory.org  
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*Egypt is a modern-day country that was one of the first regions of the world to be a cradle of civilization. Civilization first emerged in the northeast corner of Africa along the 4,200 mile Nile River over 5,000 years ago. In 3150 B.C., Menes united Upper and Lower Egypt and founded the first dynasty of Egypt. As you read, note the ways that civilization is able to grow, and how one development of civilization affects another.*

- [1] Hieroglyphs, pyramids, mummies, the Sphinx of Giza, King Tut, and Cleopatra — the sands of the Nile River Valley hold many clues about one of the most mysterious, progressive, and artistic ancient civilizations. A great deal of evidence survives about how the ancient Egyptians lived, but questions remain. Even the wise sphinx<sup>1</sup> would have trouble answering some of them. How were the pyramids built? Who came up with the idea for mummies and why? What was a typical day like for a pharaoh?<sup>2</sup>



*"The River Nile with the Giza Pyramids" by Otto Heyden is in the public domain.*

Something we can know is that Ancient Egypt had the five major components of civilization: cities, specialized workers, complex governing institutions, record keeping, and advanced technology.

### In De-Nile

None of the achievements of the remarkable ancient Egyptian civilization would have been possible without the Nile River. There is always a connection between landscape and how a people develop. It does not take the wisdom of a sphinx to understand why.

Archaeologists<sup>3</sup> and historians don't know exactly how Egyptian civilization evolved. It is believed that humans started living along the Nile's banks starting in about 6000 B.C. Uncovered remains reveal that Neolithic (late Stone Age) people thrived<sup>4</sup> in the Nile Valley that far back. But it wasn't until 3800 B.C. that the valley's inhabitants began to form a cohesive<sup>5</sup> civilization. In 3000 B.C., Egypt looked similar geographically to the way it looks today. The country was mostly covered by desert. But along the Nile River was a fertile swath that proved — and still proves — a life source for many Egyptians.

1. A sphinx is a mythical creature with the head of a human and body of a lion. The Great Sphinx of Giza is a large stone statue that can be seen near the pyramids of Giza.
2. The pharaoh is the monarch, or royal ruler, of Egypt.
3. someone who studies the science of past human life and activities by studying the artifacts of ancient people
4. **Thrive (verb):** to grow or develop successfully
5. **Cohesive (adjective):** closely united

- [5] The Nile is the longest river in the world; it flows northward for nearly 4,200 miles. In ancient times, crops could be grown only along a narrow, 12-mile stretch of land that borders the river. Early Egyptians grew crops such as beans, wheat, and cotton. Despite the lack of many natural resources, such as forests or an abundance<sup>6</sup> of land for farming, a great society emerged.

## Food for Thought

For the earliest inhabitants<sup>7</sup> of the Nile Valley, food was not easy to find. There were no McTut's selling burgers, and, though there were a lot of crocodiles, those critters were pretty hard to catch.

Over time, however, despite being in the midst of desert surroundings, people discovered that the Nile River provided many sources of food. Along the river were fruit trees, and fish swam in the Nile in great numbers.

Perhaps most importantly, they discovered that, at the same time each year, the Nile flooded for about six months. As the river receded,<sup>8</sup> it deposited a rich, brown layer of silt<sup>9</sup> that was suitable for growing wheat, beans, barley, or even cotton. Farmers learned to dig short canals leading to fields near the Nile, thus providing fresh water for year-round irrigation.<sup>10</sup> Planting immediately after a flood yielded harvests before the next year's flood.

The road to civilization required more organization and increased efficiency. Farmers began producing surplus<sup>11</sup> crops that allowed others to move their concentration from farming to pursuing other trades, such as mercantilism<sup>12</sup> or skilled craftwork. This development of specialized workers is a hallmark<sup>13</sup> of civilization.

- [10] Egyptian artisans<sup>14</sup> created copper tools such as chisels and needles — all new inventions — that allowed them to fabricate ornamental jewelry. Artisans discovered how to make bronze by mixing copper and tin, which marked the beginning of the Bronze Age. Evidence also suggests that ancient Egyptians invented the potter's wheel. This tool made it easier to create pots and jars for storage, cooking, religious needs, and decoration.

## Prime Time

One of the ancient Egyptians' inventions, the calendar, has helped define time itself. In order to know when to plant, the Egyptians needed to track days. They developed a calendar based on the flooding of the Nile that proved remarkably accurate. It contained a year of 365 days divided into 12 months of 30 days each. The five extra days fell at the end of the year.

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6. **Abundance (noun):** a large amount of something
  7. **Inhabitant (noun):** a person or animal that lives in a particular place
  8. **Recede (verb):** to move or back away
  9. fine sand, clay, or other material carried and deposited by running water
  10. the artificial watering of land for plant growth
  11. **Surplus (noun):** an amount that is more than the amount needed
  12. Mercantilism is the practice of profitable trading, such as between merchants.
  13. a quality that is typical to a particular person or thing
  14. a person who is skilled at making things by hand

Here's a problem that the sphinx might have trouble answering: how did the ancient Egyptians make their calendars? What material did they use? Remember, there was no paper. Need a clue? Take a dip in the Nile.

Large reeds<sup>15</sup> called papyrus grew wild along the Nile. The Egyptians developed a process that turned these reeds into flattened material that could be written on (also called papyrus). In fact, the English word "paper" has its root in the ancient Greek word "papyrus." Among the first things written on papyrus were calendars that tracked time.

Papyrus had many other uses. Boats were constructed by binding the reeds together in bundles. Baskets, mats, rope, and sandals were also fashioned from this multipurpose material.

- [15] Writing set the Egyptians apart from some of their neighbors. Egyptians used hieroglyphics or pictures to represent words or sounds. This early form of writing was discovered by the Western world after Napoleon's army invaded Egypt in 1798.<sup>16</sup> The Rosetta Stone, a black tablet containing inscriptions, was deciphered<sup>17</sup> and became crucial in unlocking the mystery of hieroglyphics and understanding Egyptian history.

## Sand, Land, and Civilization

Even today, the world around the Nile is quite barren.<sup>18</sup> Outside of the narrow swath of greenery next to the river, there is sand as far as the eye can see. To the Nile's west exists the giant Sahara Desert, the largest desert in the world.

From north to south, the Sahara is between 800 and 1,200 miles wide; it stretches over 3,000 miles from east to west. The total area of the Sahara is more than 3.5 million square miles. It's the world's biggest sandbox.

And, as if there weren't enough sand in the Sahara, east of the Nile are other deserts.

Although sand had limited uses, these deserts presented one tremendous strategic advantage: few invaders could ever cross the sands to attack Egypt — the deserts proved too great a natural barrier.

- [20] After learning to take advantage of the Nile's floods — and not having to fear foreign attacks — the Egyptians concentrated on improving farming techniques. As the years passed, Egyptians discovered that wheat could be baked into bread, that barley could be turned into soup (or even beer), and that cotton could be spun into clothing.

With many of life's necessities provided, the Egyptians started thinking about other things, such as art, government, religion, and philosophy — some of the basics needed to create a civilization. The pharaohs emerged, ruling Egypt for about 3,000 years. They were by and large capable administrators, strong military leaders, sophisticated traders, and overseers of great building projects. Eventually, pyramids, mummies, and great cities became touchstones<sup>19</sup> of this flourishing<sup>20</sup> culture.

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15. A reed is a thin, tall grass that grows in wet areas.

16. Napoleon Bonaparte was a French military and political leader who declared himself emperor of the French from 1804-1814.

17. **Decipher** (*verb*): to figure out the meaning of something that is difficult to read or understand

18. **Barren** (*adjective*): bare or empty

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for several thousand years. Many of its discoveries and practices have survived an even greater test of time.

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19. A touchstone is a standard by which other things are judged or recognized.
  20. **Flourish** (*verb*): to grow and do very well

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following phrases best expresses the central idea of the article?
  - A. Egypt would have developed civilization sooner if they built canals that forced the Nile River to flood less often.
  - B. The natural environment protected Egyptians from invaders and also played a critical role in their development of agriculture and calendars.
  - C. Egyptians would not have been able to predict the Nile's flooding without the invention of papyrus paper.
  - D. The desert was an important resource because it not only provided protection from invaders, but also rocks for building and salt for trading.
  
2. PART B: Which of the following phrases from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
  - A. "There is always a connection between landscape and how a people develop." (Paragraph 3)
  - B. "Among the first things written on papyrus were calendars that tracked time." (Paragraph 13)
  - C. "Writing set the Egyptians apart from some of their neighbors. Egyptians used hieroglyphics or pictures to represent words or sounds." (Paragraph 15)
  - D. "[The pharaohs] were by and large capable administrators, strong military leaders, sophisticated traders, and overseers of great building projects." (Paragraph 21)
  
3. Which statement best describes the relationship between the Nile and timekeeping?
  - A. The Egyptians used the annual flooding of the Nile to keep track of the time of day.
  - B. The Egyptians developed calendars based on the moon to help them predict when the Nile would flood.
  - C. The Egyptians used the predictable flooding of the Nile to create accurate calendars to help them plant crops.
  - D. The Egyptians planted their crops just before the Nile would flood to ensure their harvest had proper irrigation and time to grow.
  
4. How does the section "Sand, Land, and Civilization" contribute to the author's explanation of Egypt's civilization?
  - A. It shows how natural boundaries, such as deserts, allowed Egypt to develop its civilization without outside interference.
  - B. It reveals how resourceful the Egyptians were to develop civilization in an area that had no access to a reliable water supply.
  - C. It reinforces the idea that Egypt was the most unlikely successful ancient civilization to develop because it was located in a desert.
  - D. It details elements of ancient Egyptian civilization that are still present in Egypt today.

5. How does the discovery of the uses for papyrus contribute to Egypt's development of civilization?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions:** *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What technological advancements did the Egyptians make, and what were the costs and benefits of them?
2. Egypt is one of six cradles of civilization that developed independently from one another around the world. The others are in Mesopotamia, India and China near major rivers, and in South American and Central American jungles and mountains. Based on your knowledge of Egypt, what do you think are some important factors that allowed civilization to first develop?
3. In the context of this article, how do people create change? Cite evidence from the text, your personal experience, and other literature, art, and history in your answer.
4. Egypt is a land of deserts and floods. In the context of this article, who is in control: man or nature?