How the Nile River Led to Civilization in Ancient Egypt

By USHistory.org on 03.07.17

Word Count 1,108

Level MAX

Hieroglyphics, 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 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? 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 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 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 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.

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 of land for farming, a great society emerged.
Food for thought

For the earliest inhabitants 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, it deposited a rich, brown layer of silt 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. 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 crops that allowed others to move their concentration from farming to pursuing other trades, such as mercantilism or skilled craftwork. This development of specialized workers is a hallmark of civilization. Egyptian artisans 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.

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 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.

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. The Rosetta Stone, a black tablet containing inscriptions, was deciphered 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. 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, the largest desert in the world.

From north to south, the Sahara is between 800 and 1,200 miles wide; it stretches more than 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. 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 of this flourishing culture.

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

1 Which of the following options BEST describes the structure of the article?

(A) The article describes how the ancient Egyptian civilization advanced despite various obstacles.

(B) The article explains the connection between the natural environment and the development of the ancient Egyptian civilization.

(C) The article describes the many accomplishments of the ancient Egyptian civilization and its contribution to modern society.

(D) The article explains what methods have allowed archaeologists to understand the development of the ancient Egyptian civilization.

2 Is the first paragraph an effective way to engage readers' interest in the article? Why or why not?

(A) Yes, because it provides details that are directly related to the topic right away.

(B) No, because it does not provide any specific details about the things mentioned.

(C) Yes, because it presents a list of things that are familiar yet fascinating to most people.

(D) No, because it does not explain how the interesting list is connected to the overall topic.

3 Which of the following graphics would be MOST relevant, if it were added to the article?

(A) a map showing the boundaries of the Sahara Desert

(B) a map comparing the population of ancient and modern Egypt

(C) a detailed infographic that outlines the process of making papyrus

(D) an illustration of the ancient Egyptian calendar based on the Nile's flooding

4 Which of the following is addressed in the article but NOT in the graphics?

(A) the timeline of the ancient Egyptian civilization

(B) the achievements of the ancient Egyptian civilization

(C) the effects of location on the ancient Egyptian civilization

(D) the natural environment of the ancient Egyptian civilization