

# How the Nile River Led to Civilization in Ancient Egypt

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.07.17

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TOP: This photo, taken around 1915, shows the flooding of the Nile River, which happens each year and makes the land in Egypt good for farming. If not for the Nile, Egyptian civilization could not have developed, as it is the only major source of water in this desert region. MIDDLE: A map of Egypt, courtesy of Wikimedia. BOTTOM: Cursive hieroglyphs from the Papyrus of Ani, from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Image from the British Museum

The sands of the Nile River Valley hold many clues about one of the most progressive and artistic early civilizations — ancient Egypt. A great deal of evidence survives about how the ancient Egyptians lived, though mysteries remain. Something we can know is that ancient Egypt had the five major components of civilization: cities, specialized workers, government, record keeping and advanced technology.

None of the achievements of this remarkable civilization would have been possible without the Nile River. There is always a connection between landscape and how the people living there develop.

Archaeologists and historians believe humans started living along the Nile's banks starting in about 6000 B.C. Discoveries reveal that Neolithic (late Stone Age) people thrived in the Nile Valley that far back. But it wasn't until later that the valley's inhabitants began to form a more organized civilization.

## **A source of life**

In 3000 B.C., Egypt looked similar geographically to the way it does today. The country was mostly covered by desert. But along the Nile River was a swath of fertile land. This 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. Despite the lack of natural resources like forests or an abundance of farm land, a great society emerged.



For the earliest inhabitants of the Nile Valley, food was not easy to find. Over time, however, people learned that the Nile could provide plenty to eat. Along the river grew fruit trees, and fish swam in the Nile in great numbers.

Perhaps most importantly, the people there discovered that the Nile flooded for about six months every year at about the same time. As the water drew back afterward, it deposited a rich, brown layer of silt. This soil was suitable for growing wheat, beans, barley and cotton. Farmers learned to dig short canals leading to fields near the Nile. These waterways provided fresh water for irrigation. Planting immediately after a flood produced crops before the next year's flood.

## **Egyptian inventions**

Egypt's growing population required more organization and productivity. Farmers began growing extra crops, allowing others to give up farming and pursue other trades. They could become merchants or skilled workers. This development of specialized labor is a hallmark of civilization.

Egyptian artisans created new inventions like copper tools such as chisels and needles. Metalworkers learned to mix copper and tin to create bronze, a stronger metal. Evidence also suggests that ancient Egyptians invented the potter's wheel. This tool made it easier to create pots and jars for storage, cooking and decoration.

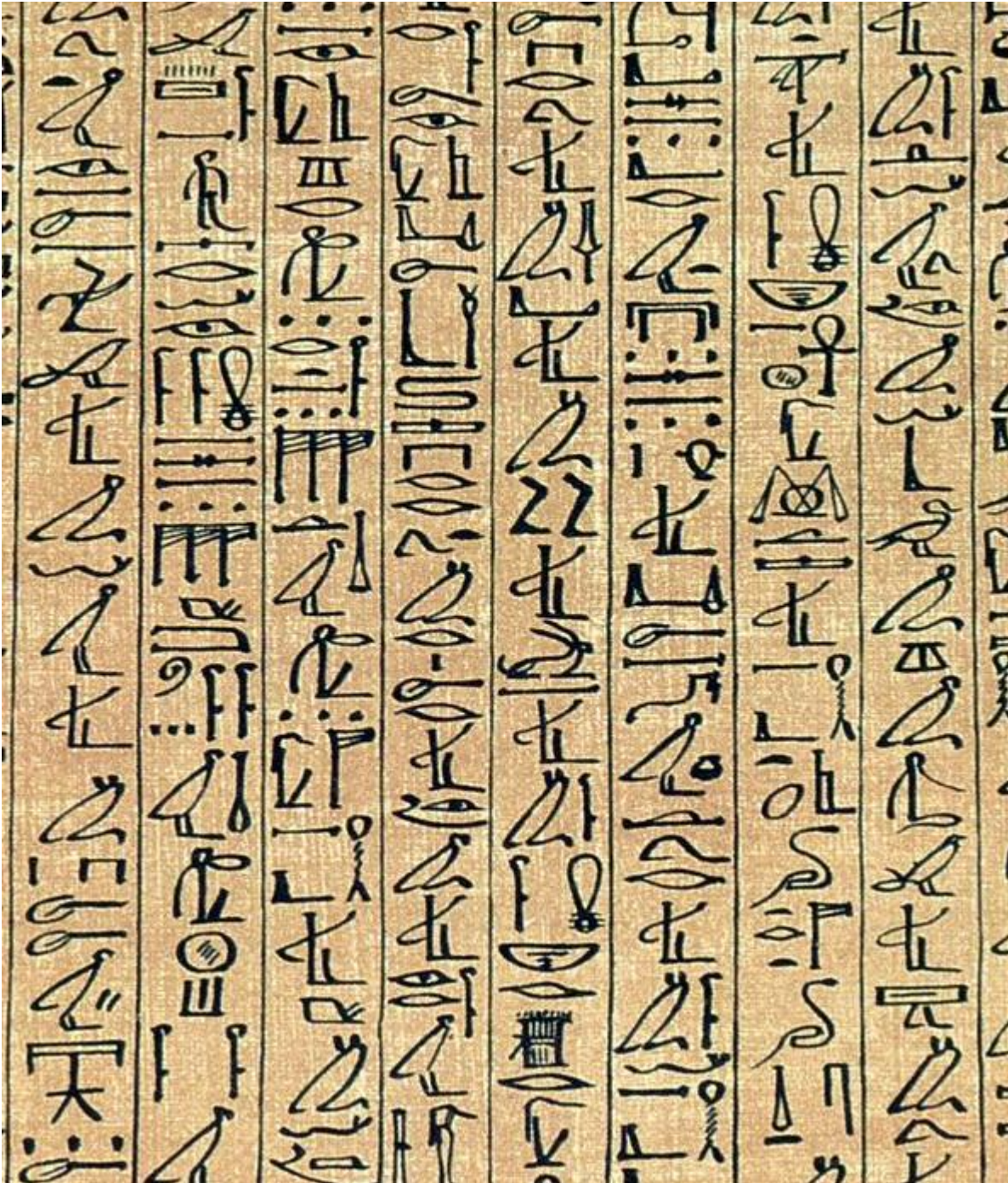
One of the ancient Egyptians' inventions, the calendar, has helped define time itself. In order to know when to plant, the Egyptians needed to track days. They developed a calendar based on the flooding of the Nile that proved remarkably accurate.

How did the ancient Egyptians make their calendars? They developed a process that turned large reeds from the Nile into a flattened material. It was called papyrus and could be written on. In fact, the English word "paper" has its root in the ancient Greek word "papyrus." Among the first things recorded on papyrus were calendars.

## **Getting their message across**

Writing set the Egyptians apart from some of their neighbors. Egyptian scribes used hieroglyphics, or pictures, to represent words or sounds.

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.



Even today, the landscape around the Nile is quite barren. Outside of the narrow band of greenery next to the river, there is sand as far as the eye can see. To the Nile's west stretches the Sahara, the largest desert in the world. East of the Nile are other dry lands.

## **Protected from invaders**

These deserts offered protection as the civilization of ancient Egypt grew. Few invaders could ever cross the dry sands to attack. After learning to take advantage of the Nile's floods — and not having to fear foreign attacks — the Egyptians concentrated on improving farming. As the years passed, Egyptians discovered that wheat could be baked into bread, barley could be turned into soup, and cotton could be spun into clothing.

With many of life's necessities provided, the Egyptians were free to think more about art, government, religion and philosophy. These are other aspects of a civilization. The pharaohs emerged. These rulers led Egypt for about 3,000 years, and most were capable leaders. Eventually, pyramids and great cities became examples of this flourishing culture, one that lasted for several thousand years.

## Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops the idea that ancient Egypt was an advanced civilization?
- (A) Despite the lack of natural resources like forests or an abundance of farm land, a great society emerged.
  - (B) Over time, however, people learned that the Nile could provide plenty to eat.
  - (C) Farmers began growing extra crops, allowing others to give up farming and pursue other trades.
  - (D) They developed a calendar based on the flooding of the Nile that proved remarkably accurate.
- 2 What is the connection between the sections "A source of life" and "Protected from invaders"?
- (A) Both sections describe how the landscape contributed to the development of ancient Egyptian civilization.
  - (B) Both sections outline why the Nile River was essential to the development of ancient Egyptian civilization.
  - (C) Both sections explain how ancient Egyptian civilization affected the Nile River and the surrounding environment.
  - (D) Both sections provide evidence to show that ancient Egyptian civilization was not affected by the desert landscape.
- 3 Which of the following selections from the article is BEST reflected in the map?
- (A) None of the achievements of this remarkable civilization would have been possible without the Nile River. There is always a connection between landscape and how the people living there develop.
  - (B) In 3000 B.C., Egypt looked similar geographically to the way it does today. The country was mostly covered by desert. But along the Nile River was a swath of fertile land. This proved — and still proves — a life source for many Egyptians.
  - (C) 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.
  - (D) Outside of the narrow band of greenery next to the river, there is sand as far as the eye can see. To the Nile's west stretches the Sahara, the largest desert in the world. East of the Nile are other dry lands.

- 4 How does the image of hieroglyphics contribute to the article?
- (A) It indicates that ancient Egyptian civilization was the first to recognize the role of communication in society.
  - (B) It emphasizes the importance of writing in ancient Egyptian civilization and shows that writing helped the society to thrive.
  - (C) It demonstrates the sophisticated writing system ancient Egyptians developed and supports the idea that they had a highly developed culture.
  - (D) It provides a point of comparison between the development of writing in ancient Egyptian civilization and modern writing systems.