

## A SKETCH OF THE GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY OF EGYPT

EGYPT, situated in the northeastern corner of Africa, is a small country, if compared with the huge continent of which it forms a part; its size about equals that of the state of Maryland. And yet it has produced one of the greatest civilizations of the world. Egypt is the land on both sides of the lower part of the river Nile, from the town of Assuan (Syene) at the First Cataract (i.e. rapids) down to the Mediterranean Sea.

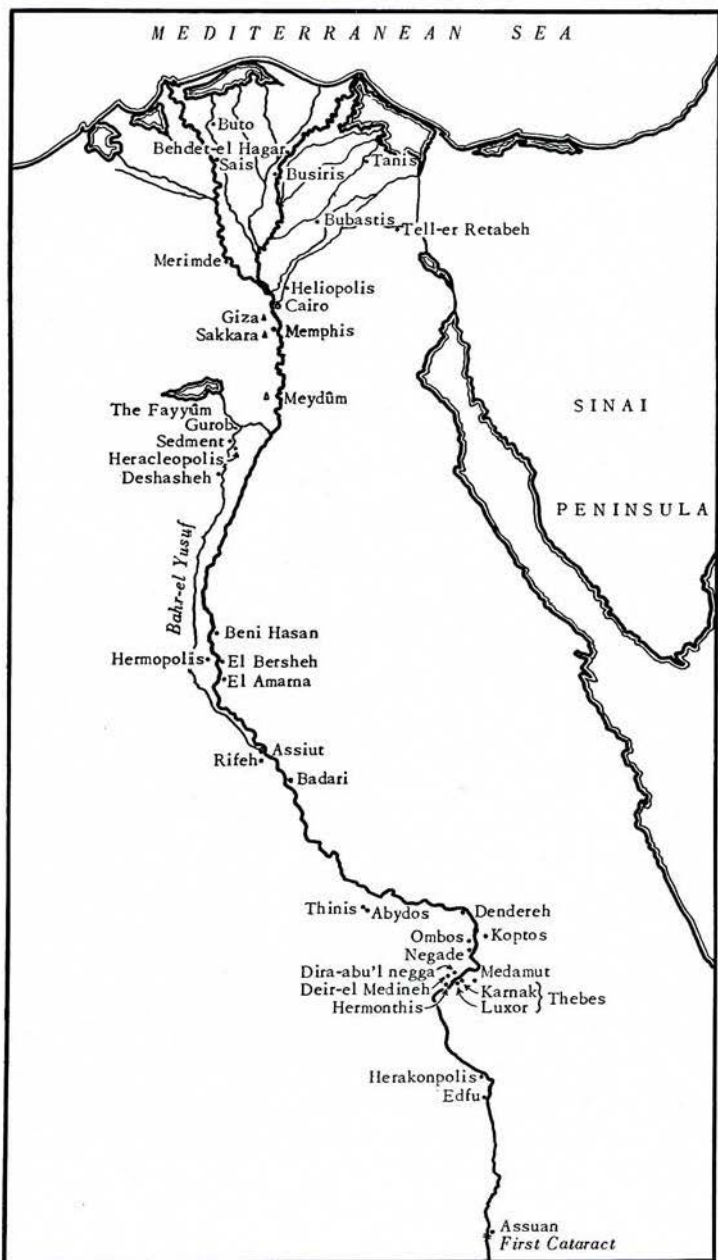
Nature herself has divided the country into two different parts: the narrow stretches of fertile land adjoining the river from Assuan down to the region of modern Cairo—which we call "Upper Egypt" or the "Sa'id"—and the broad triangle, formed in the course of millennia from the silt deposited by the river where it flows into the Mediterranean. This we call "Lower Egypt" or the "Delta."

In the course of history, a number of towns and cities have sprung up along the Upper Nile and its branches in the Delta. The two most important cities in antiquity were Memphis in the north and Thebes in the south. The site of Memphis, not far south of modern Cairo, is largely covered by palm groves today. At Thebes the remains of the temples of Amon, named after the neighboring villages of Karnak and Luxor, are still imposing witnesses of bygone greatness and splendor.

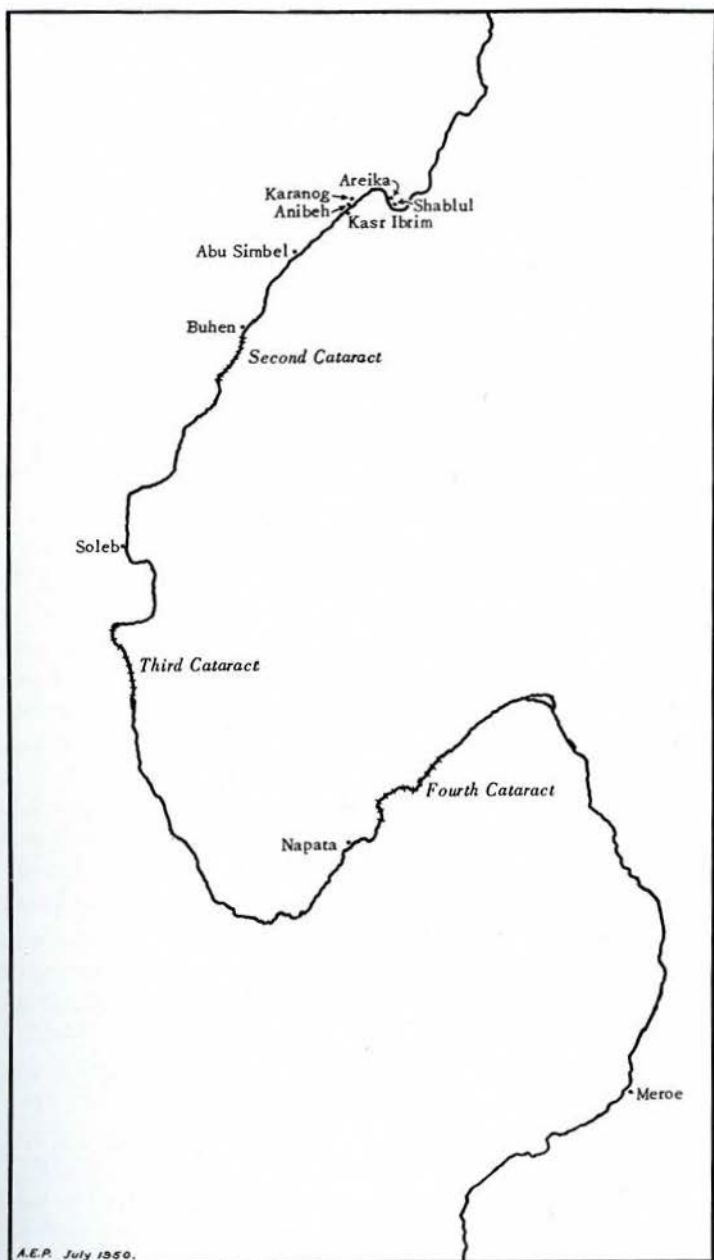
The only other sites I shall mention are those from which specimens in our collection have come.

In the Delta, we have, among others, the ruins of two important cities, Bubastis (in the southwest) and Saïs (in the northeast), in which resided the kings of the 22nd and 26th dynasties respectively. Also the sites of the prehistoric town "Merimde," on the western border, north of Giza; Tell-er Retabeh in the extreme east, the probable site of the Biblical Pithom; and, in the center, Behbet-el Hagar, the ancient Iseum, which flourished toward the end of Egyptian history.

Upper Egypt begins at Memphis, with its great pyramids and cemeteries of the Old Kingdom at Giza and Sakkara and, further to the south, the pyramid of Meydûm, which was excavated by the University Museum. Going upstream, we pass by the "Fayyûm," a fertile depression to the west of the Nile, which is flooded by a branch of the river,



Map of Egypt



A.E.P. July 1950.

Map of Nubia

the Bahr-el Yusuf. Opposite its entrance is the site of Gurob and that of Herakleopolis, residence of the kings of the 9th and 10th dynasties, with its cemetery at Sedment.

Then follow, at varying intervals, the rock tombs of Deshasheh, Beni Hasan, and el Bersheh, and the large site of el Amarna, the residence of Akhenaten, the "heretic" king; and beyond these the sites of Abydos, Dendereh, Negade, and Koptos. Further to the south, after a sharp bend in the river, we reach Thebes, with the largest of all Upper Egyptian ruins, the temples of Amon on the east bank of the river and the famous rock tombs, mainly of the New Kingdom, on the west bank. The names Dira-abu'l negga and Deir-el Medineh denote two different parts of this cemetery. Still further south lay Hierakonpolis, the ancient capital of Upper Egypt, with its temple of the falcon god Horus; Edfu with another temple of Horus built in Ptolemaic times; and finally the southern border city of Assuan. South of Assuan begins Nubia, with its majestic rock temples at Abu Simbel near the Second Cataract, and its ancient town sites and cemeteries of Anibeh, Buhen, Shablul, and Karanog. The towns of Meroe and Napata, the residences of Ethiopian kings above the Fourth Cataract, belong to the Sudan.

The fertile land, in the Delta as well as in Upper Egypt, was called by the Egyptians the "black" land as opposed to the "red" land, that is, the reddish-yellow sand of the barren deserts which border it on either side. The black soil is the result of one of the most remarkable of all natural phenomena—the inundation, which, caused by the heavy rains far south of Egypt, swells the river every summer and covers the fields on either side with rich fertile mud. In antiquity Egypt was famous for its abundant harvest of grain and wine, and even today, with the effect of the natural inundation enhanced by several large dams, the land of the Nile is of proverbial fertility.

I said that Egypt belongs to the African continent. That is true only to a certain degree. It lies in the farthest northeastern corner of Africa and is connected by land with the Sinai Peninsula, the lands of Palestine and Syria, and finally with Mesopotamia, all of which have influenced Egyptian history and civilization.

The ancient Egyptians themselves were not pure Africans. There is no greater difference than that between an Egyptian and a Negro. The Egyptians belonged to the "Hamitic" race, characterized in physical appearance as well as in language and customs by a mixture of African



and of Asiatic elements. This mixture has existed since prehistoric times, but its Asiatic component received essential additions from the 16th century B.C. on, through the influx of Semites from Syria and Palestine. The modern Egyptians belong entirely to the Arabic and Islamic civilization, and it is only once in a while that we meet a *fellah*—that is, an Egyptian peasant—whose physical characteristics still remind us of his ancestors as they are depicted on the ancient monuments.

The western neighbors of Egypt were the Libyans, a lighter-colored but also Hamitic people rather closely related to the Egyptians themselves. Their tribes inhabited not only the part of North Africa immediately adjoining the Western Delta, from which again and again they invaded the fertile Egyptian districts, but also a number of oases within the Western Desert as far south as the region of Assuan.

From Assuan up the Nile far into the modern Sudan lived the Nubians, in color quite similar to the Egyptians and in predynastic times hardly distinguishable from them. But when, around 3200 B.C., the Egyptian civilization began its admirable ascent, the Nubians did not keep pace. To the historical Egyptians the Nubians have always appeared an uncivilized people, at least during the times of Egypt's power. After the fall of the New Kingdom, the tables were turned and for a short time Ethiopians held the throne of the Pharaohs and considered themselves lords of Egypt.

As far back as Paleolithic times, the stretches on either side of the Upper Egyptian Nile were already peopled by human kind. Of these Proto-Egyptians we know very little. The only traces they have left are primitive flint implements, very similar to those which were made by other prehistoric people all over the world. Among the earliest settlements which have been found are those of Badari in Upper Egypt and Merimde in the Western Delta. The inhabitants of these sites, perhaps as early as the 5th millennium, were already tillers of the soil and had all our domesticated animals: dogs, cattle, goats and sheep, and various kinds of fowl. A great number of cemeteries in Upper Egypt complete the picture and reveal the introduction of copper tools. Household and hunting utensils were manufactured from pottery, wood, bone, ivory, and flint. Numerous small economic units, which gradually coalesced into larger entities called "nomes" or districts, seem to have existed in these early times. The nomes eventually became parts of larger communities, and for a period before the beginning of history

proper there seem to have existed two separate states corresponding to the geographical division of the Nile Valley: an Upper Egyptian state and a Lower Egyptian state, each with a king at its head.

The first event of historical importance known to us is the union of these two prehistoric kingdoms into one, or rather the subjection of Lower Egypt by the Upper Egyptian ruler whom tradition designates "Menes," while our sources seem to call him "Narmer." He initiates, with the "Old Kingdom" (ca. 3200-2280), the first of three great periods of Egyptian history. He also begins the first of the 30 "dynasties" or ruling families, into which the Egyptian historian Manethos (ca. 300 B.C.) divided the long line of Egyptian rulers down to the time of Alexander the Great.

The family of Menes resided at Thinis in Upper Egypt, the foremost city of the district which embraces the sacred town of Abydos. Near Abydos, with its sanctuary of the great god Osiris, have been found the subterranean cenotaphs of the kings of the first two dynasties and some of their imposing stelae. During this time the foundations of Egyptian culture were laid.

The first great personality we meet after Menes is Djoser. He was the founder of the 3rd dynasty and built the great step mastaba at Sakkara, not far south of the boundary between Upper and Lower Egypt. It seems that under him the residence of the kings was changed from Upper Egypt to this more northern place, from which both parts of the united kingdom could be more easily governed.

The culture of the Old Kingdom reached its culmination under the 4th dynasty, the names of whose great kings are: Snefru, Cheops, Chephren, and Mycerinus. The pyramid and mortuary temple near the modern village of Meydûm, long believed to be Snefru's, were excavated by the University Museum. Cheops, Chephren and Mycerinus, in the Greek forms that are more familiar than the Egyptian ones, are famous as the names of the kings who built the pyramids of Giza.

The rulers of the 5th and 6th dynasties continued to build pyramids, but these were much smaller than those of their ancestors. The high level of the civilization of this time is revealed in the tombs of the high state officials. The inner walls of these "mastaba"-tombs were covered with reliefs and paintings, representing daily life, and the statues of their owners, designed to ensure for them eternal life, bear witness to the development of sculptural art.



With the 6th dynasty the splendor of the Old Kingdom came to an end. Inroads of Asiatic people from the northeast and a social revolution in Egypt itself combined to bring about a complete disintegration of the state. The last king was probably dethroned, and the country broke up again into the small provinces from which in prehistoric times the two kingdoms had coalesced. Ruin and destruction followed; the prosperity of the land vanished with the loss of central authority.

The few remains that we have of the ensuing 200 years—the so-called "first intermediate period"—show how completely the land had fallen into poverty and decay.

With the rise of the 11th dynasty, whose kings reunited the whole land under their rule, a rebirth took place, and a period of new greatness was inaugurated. This "Middle Kingdom," (ca. 2060-1785 B.C.) with its succession of powerful kings bearing the names Amenemhet and Sesostris, brought art and civilization to a new climax. Ethiopia up to the Third Cataract was made an Egyptian province. The power of the district rulers was gradually crushed, a well-to-do middle class developed, and a wealth of literature was composed which to the later Egyptians appeared as classical and whose language was imitated until the end of Egyptian history.

But the Middle Kingdom was of much shorter duration than the Old. After about 270 years a new disintegration followed, and finally, about 1730 B.C., a foreign people, the "Hyksos," invaded Egypt from the northeast and ruled over the country for more than a hundred years.

Once more under Upper Egyptian leadership a unification of the whole country took place. The foreigners were besieged in their stronghold in the Northeastern Delta and finally expelled by Amosis, the first king of the 18th dynasty, who with his well-trained army drove them northward. Amosis initiated the New Kingdom (1580-1085 B.C.), and under his successors, a line of kings called Thutmosis and Amenophis, the whole of Palestine and Syria as far as the upper Euphrates was made an Egyptian province. The civilization of the New Kingdom had reached its height, and Egypt for the first time had become an Empire, far outgrowing the country's original boundaries. This period was very different from the calm self-sufficient strength witnessed in the Old Kingdom, nor did it have that conscious energy characteristic of the Middle Kingdom. Its art, however, had its own very peculiar beauty, which permeated every single creation of this period, from the majestic forms

of a temple to the charming outlines of a chair or an ointment vase. The culmination was reached under Amenophis III, who for 36 peaceful years ruled the Egyptian empire—from the Sudan to the Euphrates—which had been established by his predecessors.

Under his son and immediate successor, Amenophis IV, a strange revolution broke out, initiated by the young king himself. He forced upon his people the worship of one single god, Aten, the sun disk, to the exclusion of all other gods and goddesses. He even changed his own name to Akhenaten, built for himself and the devotees of his teaching a new city, at the place now called Tell-Amarna, and encouraged an entirely new art intended to replace the sacred old traditional forms of more than a millennium by a crude reality and "truth." But these innovations did not outlast the life of the "heretic" king. Under his son-in-law Tutankhamon the priests of the god Amon of Thebes, whom Akhenaten had persecuted with hatred, gained a complete victory. The temples of the ancient gods were restored, Tell-Amarna was abandoned, the god Aten fell into oblivion.

The second half of the New Kingdom, the period of the 19th and 20th dynasties—most of the rulers of which bore the name Rameses—followed the path of Akhenaten's predecessors, both politically and artistically. This period is characterized by the growing influence of the priestly class, especially of the priesthood of Amon of Thebes, who had become the chief national deity and "King of the Gods." At the same time, this age saw an ever increasing growth of piety, expressed outwardly in the multiplicity of enormous temples and pompous religious festivals and also manifested by greater personal devotion. Another characteristic is the influx of foreign blood, above all from the provinces of Syria and Palestine. Under these influences Egyptian culture finally became more and more effeminate and at the same time more pretentious and more luxurious—as evidenced by the elaborate development of dress and wigs. This second half of the New Kingdom was filled with wars, first against the Hittites of Asia Minor, later against invaders from the Mediterranean islands—the so-called "Sea Peoples," and the neighboring Libyans to the northwest. The final rulers of the 20th dynasty were kings in little more than name. They were controlled by the powerful priests of Amon, and finally one of these priests dethroned the last of the "Ramessids" and assumed the kingship himself. Very soon the kingdom was once more divided and Nubia, as well as the Syro-Palestinian pro-





Fig. 2. Temple relief showing Rameses II slaying an enemy. Tell-er-Retabeh, Eastern Delta.

vince, broke free of Egyptian control. There followed another period of disintegration, and for some time Ethiopians sat upon the throne of the Pharaohs. During this period Ashurbanipal invaded the Delta, conquered Memphis, and Egypt became a province of the Assyrian empire.

Soon, however, there came a liberation, this time from the north. A prince of the Delta town of Saïs freed the country from its conquerors and united it once more. From 663-525 B.C. the "Saïte" kings ruled as Pharaohs of the 26th dynasty. They restored prosperity to Egypt and even managed for a while to win back lost territories in Palestine and Syria. Egyptian art experienced its last revival, but it was rather an afterglow of past beauty than a new beginning, and its works show a cold outward perfection of finish that is in strong contrast to the spirited works of the former periods. Here ancient Egyptian history proper ceases.

From 525-332 Egypt was a Persian province. In 332 it was conquered by Alexander the Great and remained under the rule of the Ptolemies, until, in 30 B.C., it was incorporated into the Roman Empire.