

Early African Societies and the Bantu Migrations

chapter 3



Anubis, the jackal-headed Egyptian god of mummification, prepares the mummy of a deceased worker for burial. This painting comes from the wall of a tomb built about the thirteenth century B.C.E.

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EYEWITNESS:

Herodotus and the Making of a Mummy

For almost three thousand years, Egyptian embalmers preserved the bodies of deceased individuals through a process of mummification. Egyptian records rarely mention the techniques of mummification, but the Greek historian Herodotus probably traveled in Egypt about 450 B.C.E. and briefly explained the craft. The embalmer first used a metal hook to draw the brain of the deceased out through a nostril and then removed the internal organs through an incision made alongside the abdomen, washed them in palm wine, and sealed them with preservatives in stone vessels. Next, the embalmer washed the body, filled it with spices and aromatics, and covered it for about two months with natron, a naturally occurring salt substance. When the natron had extracted all moisture from the body, the embalmer cleansed it again and wrapped it with strips of fine linen covered with resin. Adorned with jewelry, the preserved body then went into a coffin bearing a painting or sculpted likeness of the deceased.

Careful preservation of the body was only a part of the funerary ritual for prominent Egyptians. Ruling elites, wealthy individuals, and sometimes common people as well laid their deceased to rest in expensive tombs equipped with furniture, tools, weapons, and ornaments that the departed would need in their next lives. Relatives periodically brought food and wine to nourish the deceased, and archaeologists have discovered soups, beef ribs, pigeons, quail, fish, bread, cakes, and fruits among those offerings. Artists decorated some tombs with elegant paintings of family members and servants, whose images accompanied the departed into a new dimension of existence.

Egyptian funerary customs were reflections of not only deeply held religious beliefs, but also of a prosperous agricultural society. Food offerings consisted mostly of local agricultural products, and scenes painted on tomb walls often depicted workers preparing fields or cultivating crops. Moreover, bountiful harvests explained the accumulation of wealth that supported elaborate funerary practices, and they also enabled some individuals to devote their efforts to specialized tasks such as embalming. Agriculture even influenced religious beliefs. Egyptians believed fervently in a life beyond the grave, and they likened the human experience of life and death to the agricultural cycle in which crops grow, die, and come to life again in another season.

As Mesopotamians built a productive agricultural society in southwest Asia and as Indo-European peoples introduced domesticated horses to much of Eurasia, cultivation and herding also transformed African societies. African agriculture first took root in the Sudan, then moved into the Nile River valley and also to

most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Agriculture flourished particularly in the fertile Nile valley, and abundant harvests soon supported fast-growing populations. That agricultural bounty underwrote the development of Egypt, the most prosperous and powerful of the early agricultural societies in Africa, and also of Nubia, Egypt's neighbor to the south.

Distinctive Egyptian and Nubian societies began to take shape in the valley of the Nile River during the late fourth millennium B.C.E., shortly after the emergence of complex society in Mesopotamia. Like their Mesopotamian counterparts, Egyptians and Nubians drew on agricultural surpluses to organize formal states, support specialized laborers, and develop distinctive cultural traditions. Like Mesopotamians again, Egyptian and Nubian residents of the Nile valley had regular dealings with peoples from other societies. They drew inspiration for political and social organization both from Mesopotamia and from their African neighbors to the south. They also traded actively with Mesopotamians, Phoenicians, Africans, and others as well. Political and economic competition sometimes led to military conflicts with peoples of other societies: on several occasions when they enjoyed great wealth and power, both Egyptians and Nubians embarked on campaigns of imperial conquest, but when their power waned, they found themselves intermittently under attack from the outside.

Indeed, like their counterparts in Mesopotamia, Egyptian and Nubian societies developed from their earliest days in a larger world of interaction and exchange. Just as Mesopotamians, Hittites, Hebrews, and Phoenicians influenced one another in southwest Asia, inhabitants of the Nile valley mixed and mingled with Mesopotamians, Phoenicians, and other peoples from the eastern Mediterranean, southwest Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Just as Indo-European peoples migrated to new lands and established communities that transformed much of Eurasia, Bantu peoples migrated from their original homeland in west Africa and established settlements that brought profound change to much of sub-Saharan Africa. By no means were Egypt and Nubia isolated centers of social development. Like Mesopotamia, Egypt in particular was a spectacularly prosperous society, but like Mesopotamia again, Egypt was only one part of a much larger world of interacting societies.

EARLY AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY IN AFRICA

Egypt was the most prominent of early African societies, but it was by no means the only agricultural society, nor even the only complex, city-based society of ancient Africa. On the contrary, Egypt emerged alongside Nubia and other agricultural societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, agricultural crops and domesticated animals reached Egypt from sub-Saharan Africa by way of Nubia as well as from southwest Asia. Favorable geographic conditions enabled Egyptians to build an especially productive agricultural economy that supported a powerful state, while Nubia became home to a somewhat less prosperous but nonetheless sophisticated society. After taking shape as distinctive societies, Egypt had regular dealings with both eastern Mediterranean and southwest Asian peoples, and Nubia linked Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean basin with the peoples and societies of sub-Saharan Africa.

Climatic Change and the Development of Agriculture in Africa

African agriculture emerged in the context of gradual but momentous changes in climatic conditions. About 10,000 B.C.E., after the end of the last ice age, the area now occupied by the Sahara desert was mostly a grassy steppe land with numerous lakes, rivers, and streams. Climatic and geographic conditions were much like those of the Sudan region—not the modern state of Sudan but, rather, the extensive transition zone of savanna and grassland that stretches across the African continent between the Sahara to the north and the tropical rain forest to the south. Grasses and cattle flourished in that environment. Many human inhabitants of the region lived by hunting wild cattle and collecting wild grains, while others subsisted on fish and aquatic resources from the region's waters.

Early Sudanic Agriculture After about 9000 B.C.E., peoples of the eastern Sudan domesticated cattle and became nomadic

herders while they continued to collect wild grains. After 7500 B.C.E. they established permanent settlements and began to cultivate sorghum, a grain still widely grown in the contemporary world for human and animal consumption. Meanwhile, after about 8000 B.C.E., inhabitants of the western Sudan began to cultivate yams in the region between the Niger and Congo rivers. Sudanic agriculture became increasingly diverse over the following centuries: sheep and goats arrived from southwest Asia after 7000 B.C.E., and Sudanic peoples began to cultivate gourds, watermelons, and cotton after 6500 B.C.E.

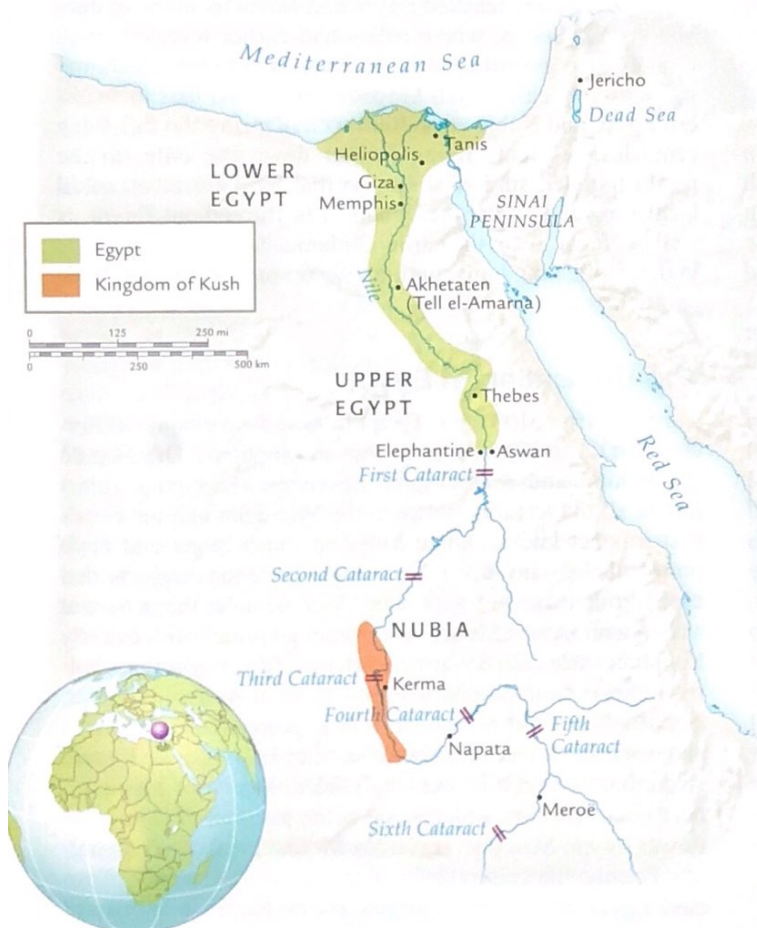
Agricultural productivity enabled Sudanic peoples to organize small-scale states. By about 5000 B.C.E. many Sudanic peoples had formed small monarchies ruled by kings who were viewed as divine or semidivine beings. For several thousand years, when Sudanic peoples buried their deceased kings, they also routinely executed a group of royal servants and entombed them along with the king so that they could continue to meet their master's needs in another life. Sudanic peoples also developed religious beliefs that reflected their agricultural society. They recognized a single divine force as the source of good and evil, and they associated it with rain—a matter of concern for any agricultural society.

Climatic Change After 5000 B.C.E. the northern half of Africa experienced a long-term climatic change that profoundly influenced social organization and agriculture throughout the region. Although there was considerable fluctuation, the climate generally became much hotter and drier than before. The Sahara desert, which as late as 5000 B.C.E. had been cool and well watered enough to support human, animal, and vegetable life, became increasingly arid and uninhabitable. This process of desiccation turned rich grasslands into barren desert, and it drove humans and animals to more hospitable regions. Many Sudanic cultivators and herders gathered around remaining bodies of water such as Lake Chad. Some moved south to the territory that is now northern Uganda. Others congregated in the valley of the **Nile River**, the principal source of water flowing through north Africa.

The Nile River Valley Fed by rain and snow in the high mountains of east Africa, the Nile, which is the world's longest river, courses some 6,695 kilometers (4,160 miles) from its source at Lake Victoria to its outlet through the delta to the Mediterranean Sea. Each spring, rain and melting snow swell the river, which surges north through the Sudan and Egypt. Until the completion of the high dam at Aswan in 1968, the Nile's accumulated waters annually flooded the plains downstream. When the waters receded, they left behind a layer of rich, fertile alluvial deposits that supported a remarkably productive agricultural economy throughout the Nile River valley.

Egypt and Nubia: “Gifts of the Nile”

Agriculture transformed the entire Nile River valley, with effects that were most dramatic in Egypt. In ancient times, Egypt referred not to the territory embraced by the modern state of Egypt but, rather, to the ribbon of land bordering the lower third of the Nile between the Mediterranean and the river's first cataract (an unnavigable stretch of rapids and waterfalls) near Aswan. Egypt enjoyed a much larger floodplain than most of the land to the south known as Nubia, the middle stretches of the Nile valley between the river's first and sixth cataracts. As the Sahara became increasingly arid, cultivators flocked to the Nile valley and



MAP 3.1

The Nile valley, 3000–2000 B.C.E.

Note the difference in size between the kingdom of Egypt and the kingdom of Kush.

What geographic conditions favored the establishment of large states north of the first cataract of the Nile River?

established societies that depended on intensive agriculture. Because of their broad floodplains, Egyptians were able to take better advantage of the Nile's annual floods than the Nubians to the south, and they turned Egypt into an especially productive agricultural region that was capable of supporting a much larger population than were Nubian lands. Because of its prosperity, the Greek historian Herodotus proclaimed Egypt the "gift of the Nile." If he had known more about Nubia, Herodotus might well have realized that it, too, was a gift of the Nile, even if it was less prosperous.

Early Agriculture in the Nile Valley

Geography ensured that both Egypt and Nubia would come under the influence of the Mediterranean basin to the north and sub-Saharan Africa to the south, because the Nile River links the two regions. About 10,000 B.C.E., migrants from the Red Sea hills in northern Ethiopia traveled down the Nile valley and introduced to Egypt and Nubia the practice of collecting wild grains. They also introduced a language ancestral to Coptic, the language of ancient Egypt, to the lower reaches of the Nile valley. After 5000 B.C.E., as the African climate grew hotter and drier, Sudanic cultivators and herders moved down the Nile, introducing Egypt and Nubia to African crops such as gourds and watermelons as well as animals domesticated in the Sudan, particularly cattle and donkeys. About the same time, wheat and barley from Mesopotamia reached Egypt and Nubia by traveling up the Nile from the Mediterranean.

Both Egyptians and Nubians relied heavily on agriculture at least by 5000 B.C.E. Egyptian cultivators went into the floodplains in the late summer, after the recession of the Nile's annual flood, sowed their seeds without extensive preparation of the soil, allowed their crops to mature during the cool months of the year, and harvested them during the winter and early spring. With less extensive floodplains, Nubians relied more on prepared fields and irrigation by waters diverted from the Nile. As in Mesopotamia, high agricultural productivity led to a rapid increase in population throughout the Nile valley. Demographic pressures soon forced Egyptians in particular to develop more intense and sophisticated methods of agriculture. Cultivators moved beyond the Nile's immediate floodplains and began to grow crops on higher ground that required plowing and careful preparation. They built dikes to protect their fields from floods and catchment basins to store water for irrigation. By 4000 B.C.E. agricultural villages dotted the



A painting from the tomb of a priest who lived about the fifteenth century B.C.E. depicts agricultural workers plowing and sowing crops in southern Egypt.

Nile's shores from the Mediterranean in the north to the river's fourth cataract in the south.

Political Organization As in Mesopotamia, dense human population in Egypt and Nubia brought a need for formal organization of public affairs. Neither Egypt nor Nubia faced the external dangers that threatened Mesopotamia, since the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and hostile deserts discouraged foreign invaders in ancient times. Nevertheless, the need to maintain order and organize community projects led both Egyptians and Nubians to create states and recognize official authorities. By 4000 B.C.E. agricultural villages along the Nile traded regularly with one another and cooperated in building irrigation networks.

The earliest Egyptian and Nubian states were small kingdoms much like those instituted in the Sudan after 5000 B.C.E. Indeed, it is likely that the notion of divine or semidivine rulers reached Egypt and Nubia from the eastern and central Sudan, where rulers had earlier founded small kingdoms to govern their agricultural and herding communities. In any case, small kingdoms appeared first in southern Egypt and Nubia after 4000 B.C.E. During the following centuries, residents living farther down the Nile (to the north) founded similar states, so that by 3300 B.C.E. small local kingdoms organized public life throughout Egypt as well as Nubia. As in the earlier Sudanic states, royal servants in these Nile kingdoms routinely accompanied deceased rulers to their graves.

The Unification of Egypt

Menes After 3100 B.C.E. Egypt followed a path quite different from those of the smaller Nubian kingdoms. Drawing on agricultural and demographic advantages, Egyptian rulers forged all the territory between the Nile delta and the river's first cataract into a unified kingdom much larger and more powerful than any other Nile state. Tradition suggests that unified rule came to Egypt about 3100 B.C.E. in the person of a conqueror named **Menes** (sometimes identified with an early Egyptian ruler called Narmer). Menes was an ambitious minor official from southern Egypt (known as Upper Egypt, since the Nile flows north) who rose to power and extended his authority north and into the delta (known as Lower Egypt). According to tradition, Menes founded the city of Memphis, near modern Cairo, which stood at the junction of Upper and Lower Egypt. Memphis served as Menes' capital and eventually became the cultural as well as the political center of ancient Egypt.

Menes (mee-nee-z)

Menes and his successors built a centralized state ruled by the pharaoh, the Egyptian king. The early pharaohs claimed to be gods living on the earth in human form, the owners and absolute rulers of all the land. In that respect, they continued the tradition of divine kingship inherited from the early agricultural societies of the Sudan. Indeed, as late as 2600 B.C.E., deceased pharaohs took royal servants with them to the grave. Egyptians associated the early pharaohs with Horus, the sky god, and they often represented the pharaohs together with a falcon or a hawk, the symbol of Horus. Later they viewed rulers as offspring of Amon, a sun god, so that the pharaoh was a son of the sun. They considered the ruling pharaoh a human sun overseeing affairs on the earth, just as Amon was the sun supervising the larger cosmos, and they believed that after his death the pharaoh actually merged with Amon. Artistic representations also depict pharaohs as enormous figures towering over their human subjects.

The Archaic Period and the Old Kingdom The power of the pharaohs was greatest during the first millennium of Egyptian history—the eras known as the **Archaic**

Period (3100–2660 B.C.E.) and the **Old Kingdom** (2660–2160 B.C.E.). The most enduring symbols of their authority and divine status are the massive pyramids constructed during the Old Kingdom as royal tombs, most of them during the century from 2600 to 2500 B.C.E. These enormous monuments stand today at Giza, near Cairo, as testimony to the pharaohs' ability to marshal Egyptian resources. The largest is the pyramid of Khufu (also known as Cheops), which involved the precise cutting and fitting of 2.3 million limestone blocks weighing up to 15 tons each, with an average weight of 2.5 tons. Scholars estimate that construction of Khufu's pyramid required the services of some eighty-four thousand laborers working eighty days per year (probably during the late fall and winter, when the demand for agricultural labor was light) for twenty years. Apart from the laborers, hundreds of architects, engineers, craftsmen, and artists



On one side of the Narmer Palette, dating to about 3100 B.C.E., Menes, unifier of Egypt, prepares to sacrifice an enemy. He wears the crown of Upper Egypt, and the falcon representing the god Horus oversees his actions in this relief carving on a votive tablet. Two fallen enemies lie at the bottom of the tablet.

also contributed to the construction of the pyramids.

Relations between Egypt and Nubia

Even after the emergence of the strong pharaonic state that took Egypt on a path different from those followed by other Nile societies, the fortunes of Egypt and Nubia remained closely intertwined. Egyptians had strong interests in Nubia for both political and commercial reasons: they were wary of Nubian kingdoms that might threaten Upper Egypt, and they desired products such as gold, ivory, ebony, and precious stones that were available only from southern lands. Meanwhile, Nubians had equally strong interests in Egypt: they wanted to protect their independence from their large and powerful neighbor to the north, and they sought to profit by controlling trade down the Nile.

The Early Kingdom of Kush

Tensions led to frequent violence between Egypt and Nubia throughout the Archaic Period and the Old Kingdom. The early pharaohs organized at least five military campaigns to Nubia between 3100 and 2600 B.C.E. Pharaonic forces destroyed the Nubian kingdom of Ta-Seti soon after the unification of Egypt, leading to Egyptian domination of Lower Nubia (the land between the first and second cataracts of the Nile) for more than half a millennium, from about 3000 to 2400 B.C.E. That Egyptian presence in the north forced Nubian leaders to concentrate their efforts at political organization farther to the south in Upper Nubia. By about 2500 B.C.E. they had established a powerful kingdom, called **Kush**, with a capital at Kerma, about 700 kilometers (435 miles) south of Aswan. Though not as powerful as united Egypt, the kingdom of Kush was a formidable and wealthy state that dominated the upper reaches of the Nile and occasionally threatened southern Egypt.

In spite of constant tension and frequent hostilities, numerous diplomats and explorers traveled from Egypt to Nubia in search of political alliances and commercial relationships, and many Nubians sought improved fortunes in Egypt. Around 2300 B.C.E., for example, the Egyptian explorer Harkhuf made four expeditions to Nubia. He returned from one of his trips with a caravan of some three



Nubian mercenary soldiers in marching formation. Nubian mercenaries were prominent in Egyptian armies and often married Egyptian wives.

hundred donkeys bearing exotic products from tropical Africa, as well as a dancing dwarf, and his cargo stimulated Egyptian desire for trade with southern lands. Meanwhile, Nubian peoples looked for opportunities to pursue in Egypt. By the end of the Old Kingdom, Nubian mercenaries were quite prominent in Egyptian armies. Indeed, they often married Egyptian women and assimilated into Egyptian society.

Turmoil and Empire

The Hyksos After the Old Kingdom declined, Egyptians experienced considerable and sometimes unsettling change. A particularly challenging era of change followed from their

encounters with a Semitic people whom Egyptians called the **Hyksos** (“foreign rulers”). Little information survives about the Hyksos, but it is clear that they were horse-riding nomads. Indeed, they probably introduced horses to Egypt, and their horse-drawn chariots, which they learned about from Hittites and Mesopotamians, provided them with a significant military advantage over Egyptian forces. They enjoyed an advantage also in their weaponry: the Hyksos used bronze weapons and bronze-tipped arrows, whereas Egyptians relied mostly on wooden weapons and arrows with stone heads. About 1674 B.C.E. the Hyksos captured Memphis and levied tribute throughout Egypt.

Hyksos rule provoked a strong reaction especially in Upper Egypt, where disgruntled nobles organized revolts against the foreigners. They adopted horses and chariots for their own military forces. They also equipped their troops with bronze weapons. Working from Thebes and later from Memphis, Egyptian leaders gradually pushed the Hyksos out of

Hyksos (HICK-sohs)

Thinking about TRADITIONS

Environment, Climate, and Agriculture

Agriculture is possible only if environmental and climatic conditions are favorable for the cultivation of crops. What environmental and climatic conditions made it possible for Egyptians and Nubians to build agricultural societies in the Nile River valley? To what extent can environmental and climatic conditions help explain why the agricultural societies of Egypt and Nubia developed along different lines?

MAP 3.2

Imperial Egypt, 1400 B.C.E.

Compare the territory ruled by the New Kingdom with the earlier kingdom of Egypt as represented in Map 3.1.

Why was the New Kingdom able to expand so dramatically to the north and south? Why did it not expand also to the east and west?



the Nile delta and founded a powerful state known as the New Kingdom (1550–1070 B.C.E.).

The New Kingdom Pharaohs of the New Kingdom presided over a prosperous and productive society. Agricultural surpluses supported a population of perhaps four million people as well as an army and an elaborate bureaucracy that divided responsibilities among different offices. One department oversaw the court and royal estates, for example, while others dealt with military forces, state-recognized religious cults, the treasury, agricultural affairs, local government, and the administration of conquered territories. Pharaohs of the New Kingdom did not build enormous pyramids as did their predecessors of the Old Kingdom, but they erected numerous temples, palaces, and monumental statues to advertise their power and authority.

Egyptian Imperialism Pharaohs of the New Kingdom also worked to extend Egyptian authority well beyond the Nile valley and the delta. After expelling the Hyksos, they sought to prevent new invasions by seizing control of regions that might pose threats in the future. Most vigorous of the New Kingdom pharaohs was **Tuthmosis III** (reigned 1479–1425 B.C.E.). After seventeen campaigns that he personally led to Palestine and Syria, Tuthmosis dominated the coastal regions of the eastern Mediterranean as well as north Africa. Rulers of the New Kingdom also turned their attention to the south and restored Egyptian dominance in Nubia. Campaigning as far south as the Nile's fifth cataract, Egyptian armies destroyed Kerma, the capital of the kingdom of Kush, and crushed a series of small Nubian states that had arisen during the period of Hyksos rule. Thus for half a millennium Egypt was an imperial power throughout much of the eastern Mediterranean basin and southwest Asia as well as most of the Nile River valley.

After the New Kingdom, Egypt entered a long period of political and military decline. Just as Hyksos rule provoked a reaction in Egypt, Egyptian rule provoked reactions in the regions subdued by pharaonic armies. Local resistance drove Egyptian forces out of Nubia and southwest Asia, then Kushite and Assyrian armies invaded Egypt itself.

Tuthmosis (tuh-MOE-sis)

Sources from the Past

Harkhuf's Expeditions to Nubia

Many Egyptians wrote brief autobiographies that they or their descendants had carved into their tombs. One of the most famous autobiographies from the Old Kingdom is that of Harkhuf, a royal official who became governor of Upper Egypt before 2300 B.C.E. The inscriptions in his tomb mention his four expeditions to Nubia to seek valuable items and report on political conditions there. The inscriptions also include the text of a letter from the boy-pharaoh Neferkare expressing his appreciation for Harkhuf's fourth expedition and his desire to see the dancing dwarf that Harkhuf brought back from Nubia.

His Majesty [Pharaoh] Menera, my Lord, sent me with my father Ara . . . to the [Nubian] land of Amam to open up a road into this country. I performed the journey in seven months. I brought back gifts of all kinds from that place . . . there was very great praise to me for it. His Majesty sent me a second time by myself . . . I came back . . . in a period of eight months . . . and I brought very large quantities of offerings from this country. Never were brought such things to this land. . . His Majesty sent me a third time to Amam . . . I came back . . . with three hundred asses laden with incense, ebony, *heknu*, grain, panther skins, ivory . . . and valuable products of every kind.

[The letter from Pharaoh Nefekare to Harkuf]: Royal despatch to the . . . governor of the caravan, Herkhuf. I have understood the words of this letter, which you have written to the king in his chamber to make him to know that you have returned in peace from Amam, together with the soldiers who were with thee. You say in this . . . letter that there have been brought back . . . beautiful offerings of all kinds . . . like the pygmy whom the seal-bearer of the god Baurtet brought back from Punt in the time of Assa. Thou say to [my] Majesty, "The like of him has never been brought back by any other person who has visited Amam."

Behold, every year you perform what thy Lord wishes and praises. Behold, you pass your days and nights meditating about doing what thy Lord orders, wishes, and praises. And His Majesty

will confer on you so many splendid honors, which shall give renown to your grandson for ever, that all the people shall say when they have heard what [my] Majesty hath done for thee. Was there ever anything like this that has been done for . . . Harkhuf when he came back from Amam because of the attention . . . he displayed in doing what his Lord commanded, and wished for, and praised?"

Come down the river at once to the Capital. Bring with you this pygmy whom you have brought from the Land of the Spirits, alive, strong, and healthy, to dance the dance of the god, and to cheer and gratify the heart of the King of the South and North. . . When he comes down with you in the boat, cause trustworthy men to be about him on both sides of the boat, to prevent him from falling into the water. When he is asleep at night cause trustworthy men to sleep by his side on his bedding.

See [that he is there] ten times [each] night. [My] Majesty wishes to see this pygmy more than any offering of the countries of Ba and Punt. If when you arrive at the Capital, this pygmy who is with you is alive, and strong, and in good health, [My] Majesty will confer upon you a greater honor than that which was conferred upon the bearer of the seal Baurtet in the time of Assa, and as great is the wish of [My] Majesty to see this pygmy orders have been brought to . . . the overseer of the priests, the governor of the town . . . to arrange that rations for him shall be drawn from every station of supply, and from every temple that has not been exempted.

For Further Reflection

- How do Harkhuf's autobiography and the letter from the pharaoh illuminate early Egyptian interest in Nubia and the processes by which Egyptians of the Old Kingdom developed knowledge about Nubia?

Source: *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, By E. A. Wallis Budge, 1914; London; J. M. Dent & Sons Limited, Aldine House, Bedford Street, W. C. Project Gutenberg.

The Revived Kingdom of Kush By 1100 B.C.E. Egyptian forces were in full retreat from Nubia. After they vacated the region, about the tenth century B.C.E., Nubian leaders organized a new kingdom of Kush with a capital at Napata, located just below the Nile's fourth cataract. By the eighth century B.C.E., rulers of this revived kingdom of Kush were powerful enough to invade Egypt, which at the time was in the grip of religious and factional disputes. **King Kashta** conquered Thebes about 760 B.C.E. and founded a Kushite dynasty that ruled

Egypt for almost a century. Kashta's successors consolidated Kushite authority in Upper Egypt, claimed the title of pharaoh, and eventually extended their rule to the Nile delta and beyond.

Meanwhile, as Kushites pushed into Egypt from the south, Assyrian armies equipped with iron weapons bore down from the north. During the mid-seventh century B.C.E., while building their vast empire, the Assyrians invaded Egypt, campaigned as far south as Thebes, drove out the Kushites, and subjected



Building pyramids and other large structures involved heavy work, especially by the less privileged classes. Here an Egyptian manuscript painting produced about 1000 B.C.E. depicts a supervisor overseeing a group of laborers as they drag a sled loaded with stone building blocks.

sun god Re. Yet another important city was Tanis on the Nile delta. At least by the time of the Middle Kingdom, and perhaps even earlier, Tanis was a bustling port and Egypt's gateway to the Mediterranean.

Cities of the Nile Valley: Nubia Nubian cities are not as well known as those of Egypt, but written records and archaeological excavations both make it clear that powerful and prosperous cities emerged in the southern Nile valley as well as in Egypt. The most prominent Nubian cities of ancient times were Kerma, Napata, and Meroë. Kerma, located just above the Nile's third cataract, was the capital of the earliest kingdom of Kush. For a millennium after its foundation about 2500 B.C.E., Kerma dominated both river and overland routes between Egypt to the north and Sudanic regions to the south. The fortunes of Kerma waxed and waned as Egypt and Kush contended with each other for power in Nubia, but it remained an influential site until its destruction about 1450 B.C.E. by the aggressive armies of Egypt's expansive New Kingdom. About the tenth century B.C.E., Napata emerged as the new political center of Nubia. Located just below the Nile's fourth cataract, Napata was more distant from Egypt than Kerma and hence less vulnerable to threats from the north. After King Kashta and his successors conquered Egypt, Napata enjoyed tremendous prosperity because of the wealth that flowed up the Nile to the Kushite capital. About the middle of the seventh century B.C.E., after Assyrian forces expelled the Kushites and asserted imperial control in Egypt, the capital of Kush moved farther south, this time to Meroë, located between the Nile's fifth and sixth

cataracts about 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) from the southern border of Egypt. Meroë presided over a flourishing kingdom of Kush that enjoyed great prosperity because of its participation in Nile trade networks until its gradual decline after about 100 C.E.

Social Classes In Egypt and Nubia alike, ancient cities were centers of considerable accumulated wealth, which encouraged the development of social distinctions and hierarchies. Like the Mesopotamians, ancient Egyptians recognized a series of well-defined social classes. Egyptian peasants and slaves played roles in society similar to those of their Mesopotamian counterparts: they supplied the hard labor that made complex agricultural society possible. The organization of the ruling classes, however, differed considerably between Mesopotamia and Egypt. Instead of a series of urban kings, as in Mesopotamia, Egyptians recognized the pharaoh as a supreme central ruler. Because the pharaoh was theoretically an absolute ruler, Egyptian society had little room for a noble class like that of Mesopotamia. Instead of depending on nobles who owed their positions to their birth, Egypt relied on professional military forces and an elaborate bureaucracy of administrators and tax collectors who served the central government. Thus, in Egypt much more than in Mesopotamia, individuals of common birth could attain high positions in society through government service.

Surviving information illuminates Egyptian society much better than Nubian, but it is clear that Nubia also was the site of a complex, hierarchical society in ancient times. Meroë, for example, was home to government officials, priests, craftsmen, merchants, laborers, and slaves. Cemeteries

associated with Nubian cities clearly reveal social and economic distinctions. Tombs of wealthy and powerful individuals were often elaborate structures—comfortable dwelling places tastefully decorated with paintings and filled with expensive goods such as gold jewelry, gems, fine furniture, and abundant supplies of food. In keeping with the ancient traditions of Sudanic kingship, many royal tombs became the final resting places also of servants ritually executed so that they could tend to the needs of their master in death. Graves of commoners were much simpler, although they usually contained jewelry, pottery, personal ornaments, and other goods to accompany the departed.

Patriarchal Society Like their Mesopotamian counterparts, both Egyptian and Nubian peoples built patriarchal societies that vested authority over public and private affairs in their men. Women of upper elite classes oversaw the domestic work of household servants. Below the level of the upper elites, even in wealthy households, women routinely performed domestic work, which included growing vegetables, grinding grain, baking bread, brewing beer, spinning thread, and weaving textiles. Elite men enjoyed comfortable positions as scribes or government officials, while men of lower classes worked as agricultural laborers, potters, carpenters, craftsmen, or fishermen. Both men and women were able to accumulate property, including slaves, and pass wealth along to their children. Men alone, however, were the governors of households and the larger society as a whole. With rare exceptions men were the rulers in both Egyptian and Nubian states, and decisions about government policies and public affairs rested mostly in men's hands.

Women's Influence in Egypt and Nubia Yet women made their influence felt in ancient Egyptian and Nubian societies much more than in contemporary Mesopotamia. In Egypt, women of the royal family frequently served as regents for young rulers. Many royal women also used their status to influence policy, sometimes going so far as to participate in plots to manipulate affairs in favor of their sons or even in palace rebellions seeking to unseat a pharaoh. In one notable case, a woman took power as pharaoh herself: Queen **Hatshepsut** (reigned 1473–1458 B.C.E.) served as coruler with her stepson Tuthmosis III. The notion of a female ruler was unfamiliar and perhaps somewhat unsettling to many Egyptians. In an effort to present her in unthreatening guise, a monumental statue of Queen Hatshepsut depicts her wearing the stylized beard traditionally associated with the pharaohs. In Nubia, in contrast, there is abundant evidence of many women rulers in the kingdom of Kush, particularly during the period when Meroë was the capital. Some ruled in their own right, others reigned jointly with male kings, and many governed also in the capacity of a regent known as the *kandake* (root of the name

Reverberations of Urbanization and the Creation of Patriarchy

Recall from chapter 1 that some scholars have attempted to explain the relatively high status of Egyptian and Nubian women by arguing that their societies were less militarized than those of Mesopotamia, and thus not as predisposed to valuing male warriors. Given the evidence of frequent warfare between Egypt and Nubia from the Archaic Period through the Middle Kingdom, do you agree with this theory? Can you think of other reasons why women of the Nile might have had more influence than their counterparts in Mesopotamia?

Candace). Meanwhile, other women wielded considerable power as priestesses in the numerous religious cults observed in Egypt and Nubia. A few women also obtained a formal education and worked as scribes who prepared administrative and legal documents for governments and private parties.

Economic Specialization and Trade

With the formation of complex, city-based societies, peoples of the Nile valley were able to draw on a rapidly expanding stock of human skills. Bronze metallurgy made its way from Mesopotamia to both Egypt and Nubia, and Sudanic peoples independently developed a technology of iron production that eventually spread to most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Pottery, textile manufacture, woodworking, leather production, stonecutting, and masonry all became distinct occupations in cities throughout the Nile valley. Specialized labor and the invention of efficient transportation technologies encouraged the development of trade networks that linked the Nile valley to a much larger world.

Bronze Metallurgy Nile societies were much slower than their Mesopotamian counterparts to adopt metal tools and weapons. Whereas the production of bronze flourished in Mesopotamia by 3000 B.C.E., use of bronze implements became widespread in Egypt only after the seventeenth century B.C.E., when the Hyksos relied on bronze weapons to impose their authority on the Nile delta. After expelling the Hyksos, Egyptians equipped their forces with bronze weapons, and the imperial armies of Tuthmosis and other pharaohs of the New Kingdom carried up-to-date bronze weapons like those used in Mesopotamia and neighboring lands. As in Mesopotamia, and other lands as well, the high cost of copper and tin kept bronze out of the hands of most people. Royal workshops closely monitored supplies of the valuable metal: officers weighed the bronze tools issued to workers at royal tombs, for example, to ensure that craftsmen did not shave slivers off them and divert expensive metal to personal uses.

Hatshepsut (hat-SHEP-soot)

Connecting the Sources

Thinking about non-elites in the ancient Egyptian past

In order to write about the past, historians must find and interpret **primary sources**. Primary sources can include material objects, archaeological evidence, oral traditions, texts (including official documents, letters, accounts, newspapers), or images. They provide the evidence on which historical narratives rest. This exercise highlights some of the challenges of interpreting original primary sources by asking you to consider the kinds of contextual information you might need in order to interpret such documents accurately, and by asking you to consider what individual documents can and cannot tell you.

The problem Writing about the ancient past poses multiple problems for historians. Among these is the problem of *preservation*, since many potential sources for historical documentation simply have not survived over thousands of years. For textual sources there is also the problem of *language and script*, since ancient societies used languages and forms of writing very different from our own. In addition, even when sources have been preserved and historians are able to decipher ancient texts, there is the problem of *selectivity*—meaning that the sources most likely to have been preserved were those generated by elites.

Fortunately for historians, ancient Egyptian peoples left many textual, material, and archaeological sources behind. The arid climate helped to preserve many textual sources written on papyrus, while the use of stone allowed many monuments to withstand thousands of years of exposure to the elements. Despite the abundance of primary sources, however, much less is known about the lives of everyday Egyptians than is known about Egyptian monarchs, nobles, political elites, and religious authorities. Historians know that most Egyptians were farmers, but few surviving sources tell their story from their own perspective. In

the following two documents, which were generated centuries apart, think about what historians can and cannot infer about the lives of non-elites in ancient Egypt.

The documents Read the documents below, and consider carefully the questions that follow.

Document 1: *Stela (inscribed stone) from the tomb of a man named Mentuhotep, from the 11th Dynasty (2133–1991 B.C.E.). Mentuhotep is depicted to the left, with his parents and his son. To the right are Mentuhotep's other children and his servants.*

- (1) *O ye who live and are upon the earth and who shall pass by this tomb, who love life and hate death, say ye: "May Osiris, head of the Westerners [people of the underworld], glorify Menthotpe."*
- (2) *Now I was first among my contemporaries, the foreman of my gang [man of the people], one who discovered the statement about which he had been asked, and answered (it) appropriately.*
- (3) *cool(-headed), one who obtained bread in its (due) season, one whose (own) counsel replaced for him a mother at home.*



Document 1: Stela from the tomb of Mentuhotep.

a father making the family fortune (??), and a son of good disposition, one whom his (own) nature instructed as (it were) a child growing up with its father.

- (4) Now although I was become an orphan, I acquired cattle and got oxen (?) and developed my business in goats; I built a house and excavated a (garden-) pond, the priest Menthotpe.

Translated by Alan Gardiner. From W. M. F. Petrie, *Tombs of the Courtiers and Oxyrhynchos*, 1922.

Document 2: The following comes from a declaration freeing slaves, from the 20th Dynasty (1185–1070 B.C.E.).

Year 28, 1st month of Inundation, day 10, under the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Ramesses (XI). On this day, declaration made by the stable-master Neb-nufe and his wife the musician of Seth of Spermeru Rennufe, to wit:

"We purchased the female slave Dini-huiry and she gave birth to these three children, one male and two female, in all three. And I [i.e., Rennufe] took them and nourished them and brought them up, and I have reached this day with them without their doing evil towards me, but they dealt well with me, I having no son or daughter except them. And the stable-master Padiu entered my house and took Ta-Amon-no, their elder sister, to wife, he being related to me and being my younger brother. And I accepted him for her and he is with her at this day.

"Now behold, I have made her a freewoman of the land of Pharaoh, and if she bears either son or daughter, they shall be freemen of the land of Pharaoh in exactly the same way, they being with the stable-master Padiu, this younger brother of mine. And the children shall be with their elder sister in the house of Padiu, this stable-master, this younger brother of mine, and today I make him a son of mine exactly like them."

And she said: "As Amun endures, and the Ruler endures, I (hereby) make the people whom I have put on record freemen of the land of Pharaoh, and if any son, daughter, brother, or sister of their mother and their father should contest their rights, except Padiu this son of mine—for they are indeed no longer with him as servants, but are with him as younger siblings, being freemen of the land <of Pharaoh>—may a donkey copulate

with him and donkey with his wife, whoever it be that shall call any of them a servant.

"And if I have fields in the country, or if I have any property in the world, or if I have merchants (?), these shall be divided among my four children, Padiu being one of them. And as for these matters of which I have spoken, they are entrusted in their entirety to Padiu, this son of mine, who dealt well with me when I was a widow and when my husband had died."

Before many and numerous witnesses . . . (both men and women).

Alan H. Gardiner, *Adoption Extraordinary*, *JEA* 26 (1940) 23–29

Questions

1. What can these sources definitively tell you about the lives of the people who produced them? What **facts** can be gleaned from these sources?
2. In Document 1, what is the life story of Mentuhotep, according to the inscription in the stela? Does the inscription indicate that the social mobility described by Mentuhotep was common or uncommon during the 11th Dynasty?
3. Also in Document 1, do the figures on the right offer clues about the daily lives of people in Mentuhotep's household?
4. In Document 2, why does Rennufe want to free the three slaves under question? Does this document offer any clues about the experience of slavery in Egypt during the 20th Dynasty?
5. Also in Document 2, does this document allow speculation about the status of women in Egypt during the 20th Dynasty? If so, in what ways?
6. Taking both documents together, what can each of them tell us about the experience of non-elites in ancient Egypt? What kinds of additional contextual information would you need in order to gauge this question more fully?
7. Sources such as these can give historians tantalizing evidence about the lives of everyday people, even in the ancient past. To understand them accurately, however, historians must place individual sources in their larger historical context in order to decide whether they represent broad trends or historical exceptions.

Source Website: **Document 1:** http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/texts/mentuhotep_stela.htm. **Document 2:** http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/texts/adoption_papyrus.htm

A wall painting produced about 1300 B.C.E. shows Egyptian goldsmiths fashioning jewelry and decorative objects for elite patrons. Early experience with gold metallurgy prepared craftsmen to work with bronze and iron when knowledge of those metals reached Egypt.



Iron Metallurgy Bronze was even less prominent in Nubian societies than in Egypt. Indeed, Nubia produced little bronze, since the region was poor in copper and tin, and so relied on imports from the north. During the centuries after 1000 B.C.E., however, the southern Nile societies made up for their lack of bronze with the emergence of large-scale production of iron. The Hittites had developed techniques for forging iron in Anatolia about 1300 B.C.E., but **iron metallurgy** in Africa arose independently from local experimentation with iron ores, which are plentiful in sub-Saharan Africa. The earliest traces of African iron production discovered by archaeologists date from about 900 B.C.E. in the Great Lakes

region of east Africa (modern-day Burundi and Rwanda) and also on the southern side of Lake Chad (in modern-day Cameroon). It is quite possible that African peoples produced iron before 1000 B.C.E. From the Great Lakes region and the Sudan, iron metallurgy quickly spread throughout most

A wooden model found in a tomb shows how Egyptians traveled up and down the Nile River. Produced about 2000 B.C.E., this sculpture depicts a relatively small boat with a mast, sail, rudder, and poles to push the vessel through shallow waters as the figure in front gauges the water's depth. Many wall and tomb paintings confirm the accuracy of this model.



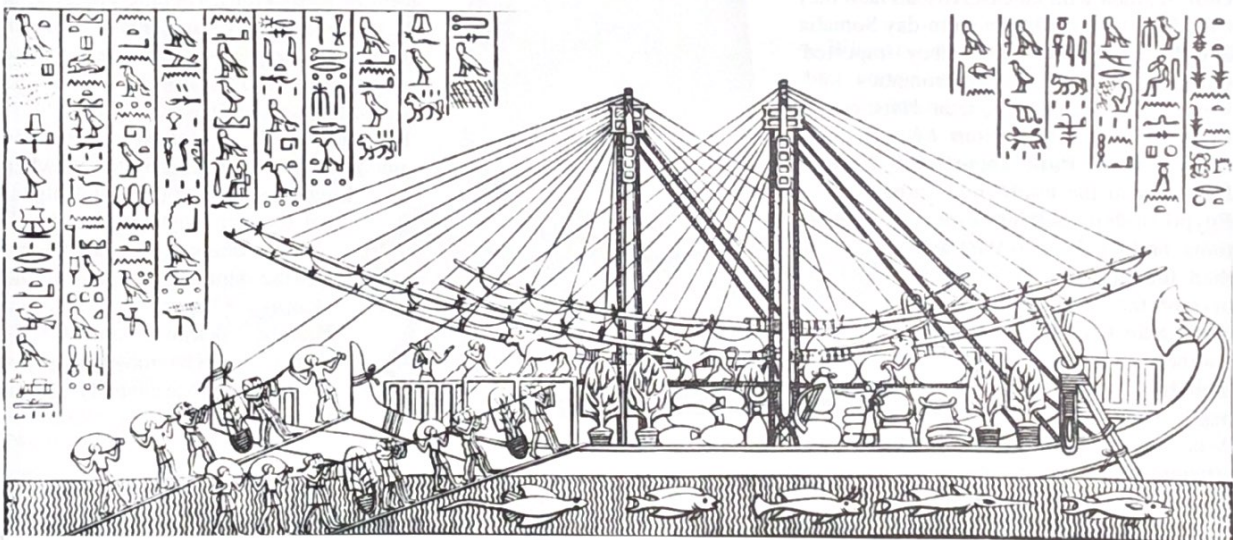
of sub-Saharan Africa. Furnaces churned out iron implements both in Nubia and in west Africa at least by 500 B.C.E. Meroë in particular became a site of large-scale iron production. Indeed, archaeologists who excavated Meroë in the early twentieth century C.E. found enormous mounds of slag still remaining from ancient times.

Transportation Nile craftsmen also worked from the early days of agricultural society to devise efficient means of transportation. Within Egypt, the Nile River greatly facilitated transportation, and Egyptians traveled up and down the river before 3500 B.C.E. Because the Nile flows north, boats could ride the currents from Upper to Lower Egypt. Meanwhile, prevailing winds blow almost year-round from the north, so that by raising a sail, boats could easily make their way upriver from Lower to Upper Egypt. Soon after 3000 B.C.E. Egyptians sailed beyond the Nile into the Mediterranean, and by about 2000 B.C.E. they had thoroughly explored the waters of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the western portion of the Arabian Sea. Egyptians also made use of Mesopotamian-style wheeled vehicles for local transport, and they relied on donkey caravans for transport between the Nile valley and ports on the Red Sea.

In Nubia, navigation on the Nile was less convenient than in Egypt because unnavigable cataracts made it necessary to transport goods overland before continuing on the river. Moreover, sailing ships heading upriver found it difficult to negotiate a long stretch of the Nile around the fourth cataract because winds blow the same direction as the currents. Thus,

although Nubian societies were able to make some use of the Nile for purposes of transportation, they had to rely more than Egyptians on overland transport by wheeled vehicles and donkey caravan.

Trade Networks In both Egypt and Nubia, specialized labor and efficient means of transportation encouraged the development of long-distance trade. Egypt was in special need of trade because the land enjoys few natural resources other than the Nile. Irregular exchanges of goods between Egypt and Nubia took place in early times, perhaps 4000 B.C.E. or even before. By the time of the Old Kingdom, trade flowed regularly between Egypt and Nubia. The cities of Aswan and Elephantine at the southern border of Egypt reflected that trade in their very names: Aswan took its name from the ancient Egyptian word *swene*, meaning "trade," and Elephantine owed its name to the large quantities of elephant ivory that passed through it while traveling down the Nile from Nubia to Egypt. Apart from ivory, exotic African goods such as ebony, leopard skins, ostrich feathers, gemstones, gold, and slaves went down the Nile in exchange for pottery, wine, honey, and finished products from Egypt. Among the most prized Egyptian exports were fine linen textiles woven from the flax that flourished in the Nile valley as well as high-quality decorative and ornamental objects such as boxes, furniture, and jewelry produced by skilled artisans. Commerce linked Egypt and Nubia throughout ancient times, even when tensions or hostilities complicated relations between the two societies.



Queen Hatshepsut's fleet takes on cargo at Punt. Stevedores (dockworkers who load and unload ships) carry jars of aromatics and trees with carefully wrapped roots onto the Egyptian vessels. In the bottom panel, ships loaded with cargo prepare to depart. From the tomb of Queen Hatshepsut, c. 1450 B.C.E.

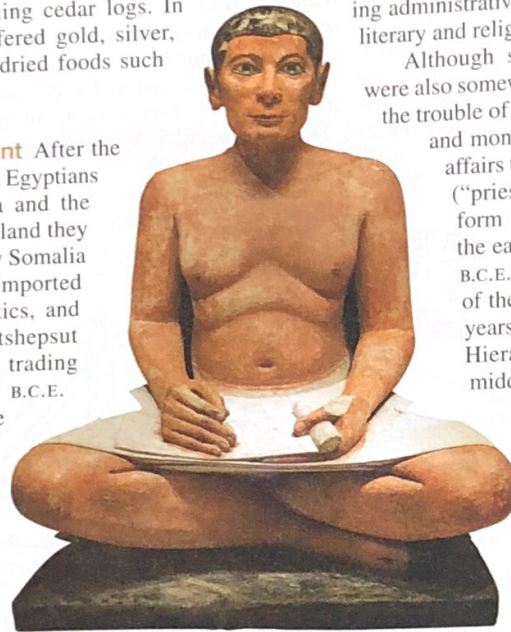
Thinking about ENCOUNTERS

Interactions between Egypt and Nubia

The geography of the long Nile River valley ensured that the lands of Egypt and Nubia would have frequent dealings with each other. Consider the different forms of engagement that brought Egypt and Nubia into interaction with each other: diplomatic missions, military expeditions, and trading relationships. What kinds of effects did these different forms of engagement have in both Egypt and Nubia?

Egyptian merchants looked north as well as south. They traded with Mesopotamians as early as 3500 B.C.E., and after 3000 B.C.E. they were active throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin. Egyptian commerce in the Mediterranean sometimes involved enormous transfers of goods. Since Egypt has few trees, for example, all wood came from abroad. Pharaohs especially prized aromatic cedar for their tombs, and Egyptian ships regularly imported huge loads from Lebanon. One record of about 2600 B.C.E. mentions an expedition of forty ships hauling cedar logs. In exchange for cedar Egyptians offered gold, silver, linen textiles, leather goods, and dried foods such as lentils.

Maritime Trade: Egypt and Punt After the establishment of the New Kingdom, Egyptians also traded through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden with an east African land they called Punt—probably modern-day Somalia and Ethiopia. From Punt they imported gold, ebony, ivory, cattle, aromatics, and slaves. The tomb of Queen Hatshepsut bears detailed illustrations of a trading expedition to **Punt** about 1450 B.C.E. Paintings in the tomb show large Egyptian ships bearing jewelry, tools, and weapons to Punt and then loading the exotic products of the southern land, including apes, monkeys, dogs, a panther, and myrrh trees with their roots carefully bound in bags. Thus, as in southwest Asia, specialization of labor and efficient technologies of transportation not only quickened the



A painted limestone sculpture from the Old Kingdom depicts an Egyptian scribe writing on papyrus. How did formal education and literacy influence social distinctions and the development of social classes in ancient Egypt?

hieroglyphic (hey-eh-ruh-GLIF-ik)

economies of complex societies in Egypt and Nubia but also encouraged their interaction with peoples of distant lands.

Early Writing in the Nile Valley

Hieroglyphic Writing Writing appeared in Egypt at least by 3200 B.C.E., possibly as a result of Mesopotamian influence. As in Mesopotamia, the earliest Egyptian writing was pictographic, but Egyptians soon supplemented their pictographs with symbols representing sounds and ideas. Early Greek visitors to Egypt marveled at the large and handsome pictographs that adorned Egyptian monuments and buildings. Since the symbols were particularly prominent on temples, the visitors called them *hieroglyphs*, from two Greek words meaning “holy inscriptions.” Quite apart from monument inscriptions, **hieroglyphic** writing survives on sheets of papyrus, a paper-like material fashioned from the insides of papyrus reeds, which flourish along the Nile River. The hot, dry climate of Egypt has preserved not only mummified bodies but also large numbers of papyrus texts bearing administrative and commercial records as well as literary and religious texts.

Although striking and dramatic, hieroglyphs were also somewhat cumbersome. Egyptians went to the trouble of using hieroglyphs for formal writing and monument inscriptions, but for everyday affairs they commonly relied on the **hieratic** (“priestly”) script, a simplified, cursive form of hieroglyphs. Hieratic appeared in the early centuries of the third millennium B.C.E., and Egyptians made extensive use of the script for more than three thousand years, from about 2600 B.C.E. to 600 C.E. Hieratic largely disappeared after the middle of the first millennium C.E., when Egyptians adapted the Greek alphabet to their language and developed alphabetic scripts known as the demotic (“popular”) and Coptic (“Egyptian”) scripts. Hieratic, demotic, and Coptic scripts all survive mostly in papyrus texts but occasionally also in inscriptions.

Education Formal education and literacy brought handsome rewards in ancient Egypt. The privileged life of a scribe comes across clearly in a short work known as

“The Satire of the Trades.” Written by a scribe exhorting his son to study diligently, the work detailed all the miseries associated with eighteen different professions: metalsmiths stunk like fish; potters grubbed in the mud like pigs; fishermen ran the risk of sudden death in the jaws of the Nile’s ferocious crocodiles. Only the scribe led a comfortable, honorable, and dignified life.

Nubian peoples spoke their own languages, although many individuals were fully conversant in Egyptian as well as their native tongues, but all early writing in Nubia was Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. Indeed, over the centuries Egypt wielded great cultural influence in Nubia, especially during times when Egyptian political and military influence was strong in southern lands. Egyptian political and military officials often erected monuments and inscribed them with accounts in hieroglyphics of their deeds in Nubia. Similarly, Egyptian priests traveled regularly to Nubia, organized temples devoted to Egyptian gods, and promoted their beliefs in hieroglyphics. Egyptian influence was very strong in Nubia also during the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. when the kings of Kush ruled Egypt as pharaohs and sponsored extensive trade, travel, and communication between Egypt and Nubia.

Meroitic Writing Nubian inscriptions continued to appear in Egyptian hieroglyphic writing as late as the first century C.E. After about the fifth century B.C.E., however, Egyptian cultural influence declined noticeably in Nubia. After the transfer of the Kushite capital from Napata to Meroë, Nubian scribes even devised an alphabetic script for the **Meroitic** language. They borrowed Egyptian hieroglyphs but used them to represent sounds rather than ideas and so created a flexible writing system. Many Meroitic inscriptions survive, both on monuments and on papyrus. To date, however, scholars have not been able to understand Meroitic writing. Although they have ascertained the sound values of the alphabet, the Meroitic language itself is so different from other known languages that no one has been able to decipher Meroitic texts.

The Development of Organized Religious Traditions

Amon and Re Like their counterparts in other world regions, Egyptians and Nubians believed that deities played prominent roles in the world and that proper cultivation of the gods was an important community responsibility. The principal gods revered in ancient Egypt were Amon and Re. **Amon** was originally a local Theban deity associated with the sun, creation, fertility, and reproductive forces, and **Re** was a sun god worshiped at Heliopolis. During the Old Kingdom, priests associated the two gods with each other and honored them in the combined cult of Amon-Re. At

Heliopolis, a massive temple complex supported priests who tended to the cult of Amon-Re and studied the heavens for astronomical purposes. When Egypt became an imperial power during the New Kingdom, some devotees suggested that Amon-Re might even be a universal god who presided over all the earth.

Aten and Monotheism For a brief period the cult of Amon-Re faced a monotheistic challenge from the god **Aten**, another deity associated with the sun. Aten’s champion was Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (reigned 1353–1335 B.C.E.), who changed his name to **Akhenaten** in honor of his preferred deity. Akhenaten considered Aten the world’s “sole god, like whom there is no other.” Thus, unlike the priests of Amon-Re, most of whom viewed their god as one among many, Akhenaten and others devoted to Aten considered their deity the one and only true god. Their faith represented one of the world’s earliest expressions of monotheism—the belief that a single god rules over all creation.

Akhenaten built a new capital city called Akhetaten (“Horizon of Aten,” located at modern Tell el-Amarna), where broad streets, courtyards, and open temples allowed unobscured vision and constant veneration of the sun. He also dispatched agents to all parts of Egypt with instructions to encourage the worship of Aten and to chisel out the names of Amon, Re, and other gods from inscriptions on temples and public buildings. As long as Akhenaten lived, the cult of Aten flourished. But when the pharaoh died, traditional priests mounted a fierce counterattack, restored the cult of Amon-Re to privileged status, and nearly annihilated the worship and even the memory of Aten.

Mummification Whereas Mesopotamians believed with Gilgamesh that death brought an end to an individual’s existence, many Egyptians believed that death was not an end so much as a transition to a new dimension of existence. The deeply held belief in the possibility of immortality helps to explain the Egyptian practice of mummifying the dead. During the Old Kingdom, Egyptians believed that only the ruling elites would survive the grave, so they mummified only pharaohs and their close relatives. Later, however, other royal officials and wealthy individuals merited the posthumous honor of mummification. During the New Kingdom, Egyptians came to think of eternal life as a condition available to normal mortals as well as to members of the ruling classes. By the time the Greek historian Herodotus described the process of mummification in the fifth century B.C.E., many wealthy families were able to help their deceased relatives attain immortality by preserving their bodies. Mummification never became general practice in Egypt, but with or without

Akhenaten (ahk-eh-NAH-ton)

Sources from the Past

Hymn to Osiris

According to myth, Osiris was murdered by his evil brother Seth, and his dismembered body was scattered throughout the land. Osiris' wife retrieved the parts and gave her husband a proper burial, an act that so impressed the gods they bestowed upon Osiris an immortal life as a god of the underworld. The Cult of Osiris worshipped him as the source of the Nile, and also as the judge of human souls after death. The Hymn to Osiris demonstrates the respect the gods, particularly Ra, had for Osiris, and also his role in ensuring that the Nile continued to flow, so that Egyptians could continue to enjoy the fruits of its bounty.

"[Praise be] unto thee, O thou who extends thine arms, who lies asleep on thy side, who lies on the sand, the Lord of the earth, the divine mummy. . . . Thou art the Child of the Earth Serpent, of great age. Ra . . . shines upon thy body, when thou lie on thy bed in the form of Seker, so that he may drive away the darkness that shrouds thee, and may infuse light in thy two eyes. He passes a long period of time shining upon thee, and sheds tears over thee. The earth rests upon thy shoulders, and its corners rest upon thee as far as the four pillars of heaven. If thou move thyself, the earth quakes, for thou art great . . . [The Nile] appears out of the sweat of thy two hands. Thou breathe

forth the air that is in thy throat into the nostrils of men, drive away that thing whereon they live. Through thy nostrils subsist the flowers, the herbage, the reeds . . . the barley, the wheat, and the plants whereon men live. If canals are dug . . . and the lands are ploughed up, and tombs and funerary monuments are made, they [all] rest upon thee. It is thou who makes them. They are upon thy back. They are more than can be described in writing. There is no vacant space on thy back, they all lie on thy back, and yet [thou says] not, "I am [over] weighted therewith. Thou art the father and mother of men and women, they live by thy breath, they eat the flesh of thy members. Primeval God is thy name."

For Further Reflection

- As described in the *Hymn to Osiris*, what was the role of Osiris in maintaining life on earth?

Source: The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians, By E. A. Wallis Budge, 1914; London; J. M. Dent & Sons Limited, Aldine House, Bedford Street, W. C. Project Gutenberg.

preservation of the body, a variety of religious cults promised to lead individuals of all classes to immortality.

Cult of Osiris The cult of **Osiris** attracted particularly strong popular interest. According to the myths surrounding the cult, Osiris's evil brother Seth murdered him and scattered his dismembered parts throughout the land, but the victim's loyal wife, Isis, retrieved his parts and gave her husband a proper burial. Impressed by her devotion, the gods restored Osiris to life—not to physical human life among mortals, however, but to a different kind of existence as god of the underworld, the dwelling place of the departed. Because of his death and resurrection, Egyptians associated Osiris with the Nile (which flooded, retreated, and then flooded again the following year) and with their crops (which grew, died, and then sprouted and grew again).

Egyptians also associated Osiris with immortality and honored him through a religious cult that demanded observance of high moral standards. As lord of the underworld, Osiris had the power to determine who deserved the blessing of immortality and who did not. Following their deaths,

individual souls faced the judgment of Osiris, who had their hearts weighed against a feather symbolizing justice. Those with heavy hearts carrying a burden of evil and guilt did not merit immortality, whereas those of pure heart and honorable deeds gained the gift of eternal life. Thus Osiris's cult held out hope of eternal reward for those who behaved according to high moral standards, and it cast its message in terms understandable to cultivators in early agricultural society.

Nubian Religious Beliefs Nubian peoples observed their own religious traditions, some of which they probably inherited from the early agricultural societies of the Sudan, but little written information survives to throw light on their religious beliefs. The most prominent of the Nubian deities was the lion-god Apedemak, often depicted with a bow and arrows, who served as war god for the kingdom of Kush. Another deity, Sebiuameker, was a creator god and divine guardian of his human devotees.

Alongside native traditions, Egyptian religious cults were quite prominent in Nubia, especially after the aggressive



Osiris, Egyptian god of the underworld (seated at right), receives a recently deceased individual, while attendants weigh the heart of another individual against a feather to determine if the person is deserving of immortality. This illustration comes from a papyrus copy of the *Book of the Dead* that was buried with a royal mummy.

BANTU MIGRATIONS AND EARLY AGRICULTURAL SOCIETIES OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

pharaohs of the New Kingdom imposed Egyptian rule on the southern lands. Nubian peoples did not mummify the remains of their deceased, but they built pyramids similar to those of Egypt, although smaller, and they embraced several Egyptian gods. Amon was the preeminent Egyptian deity in Nubia as in Egypt itself: many Nubian temples honored Amon, and the kings of Kush portrayed themselves as champions of the Egyptian god. Osiris was also popular in Nubia, where he sometimes appeared in association with the native deity Sebiuameker. In the early days after their introduction, Egyptian cults were most prominent among the Nubian ruling classes. Gradually, however, Egyptian gods attracted a sizable following, and they remained popular in Nubia until the sixth century C.E. They did not displace native gods so much as they joined them in the Nubian pantheon. Indeed, Nubians often identified Egyptian gods with their own deities or endowed the foreign gods with traits important in Nubian society.



An elaborate gold ring from a tomb at Meroë, dating probably to the third century C.E., depicts a deity named Sebiuameker (sometimes referred to as Sebewyemeker). Although often associated with Osiris, Sebiuameker was a Meroitic god with no exact counterpart in Egypt.

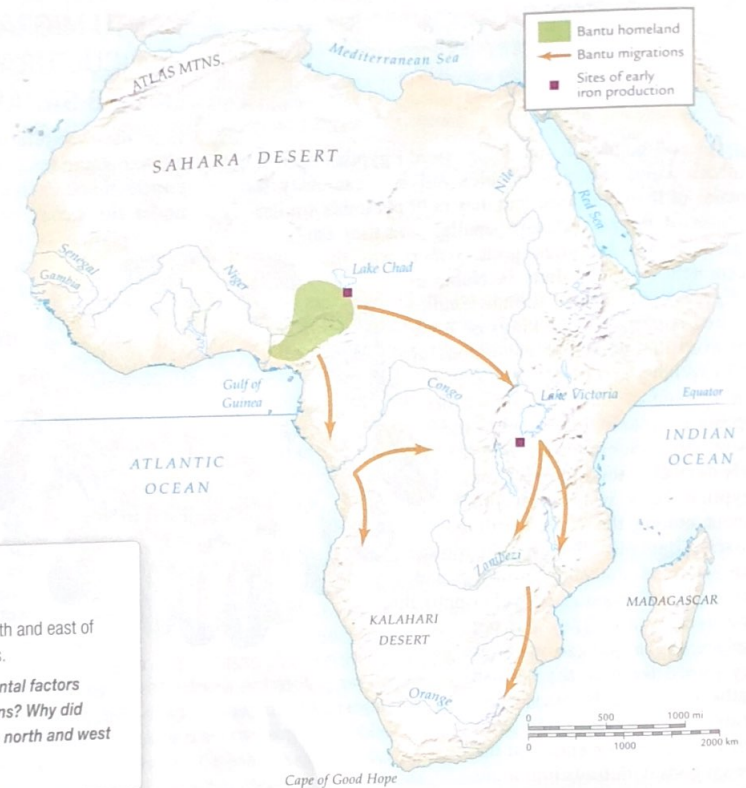
Like their counterparts in southwest Asia, Egyptian and Nubian societies participated in a much larger world of interaction and exchange. Mesopotamian societies developed under the strong influences of long-distance trade, diffusions of technological innovations, the spread of cultural traditions, and the far-flung migrations of Semitic and Indo-European peoples. Similarly, quite apart from their dealings with southwest Asian and Mediterranean peoples, Egyptian and Nubian societies developed in the context of widespread interaction and exchange in sub-Saharan Africa. The most prominent processes unfolding in sub-Saharan Africa during ancient times were the migrations of Bantu-speaking peoples and the establishment of agricultural societies in regions where Bantu speakers settled. Just as Sudanic agriculture spread to the Nile valley and provided an economic foundation for the development of Egyptian and Nubian societies, it also spread to most other regions of Africa south of the Sahara and supported the emergence of distinctive agricultural societies.

The Dynamics of Bantu Expansion

The Bantu Among the most influential peoples of sub-Saharan Africa in ancient times were those who spoke **Bantu** languages. The original Bantu language was one of many related tongues in the larger Niger-Congo family of languages widely spoken in west Africa after 4000 B.C.E. (Niger-Congo languages include also those spoken by Mande, Kru, Wolof, Yoruba, Igbo, and other peoples.) The earliest Bantu speakers inhabited a region embracing the eastern part of modern Nigeria and the southern part of modern Cameroon. Members of this community referred to themselves as *bantu* (meaning “persons” or “people”). The earliest Bantu speakers settled mostly along the banks of rivers, which they navigated in canoes, and in open areas of the region’s forests. They cultivated yams and oil palms, which first came under cultivation by early agricultural peoples in the western Sudan, and in later centuries they also adopted crops that reached them from the eastern and central Sudan, particularly millet and sorghum. They also kept goats and raised guinea fowl. They lived in clan-based villages headed by chiefs who conducted religious rituals and represented their communities in dealings with neighboring villages. They traded regularly with hunting and gathering peoples who inhabited the tropical forests. Formerly called pygmies, these peoples are now referred to as forest peoples. Bantu cultivators provided these forest peoples with pottery and stone axes in exchange for meat, honey, and other forest products.

Bantu Migrations Unlike most of their neighbors, the Bantu displayed

an early readiness to migrate to new territories. By 3000 B.C.E. they were slowly spreading south into the west African forests, and after 2000 B.C.E. they expanded rapidly to the south and east toward the Congo River basin and east toward the Great Lakes, absorbing local populations of hunting, gathering, and fishing peoples into their agricultural societies. Over the centuries, as some groups of Bantu speakers settled and others moved on to new territories, their languages differentiated into more than five hundred distinct but related tongues. (Today, more than ninety million people speak Bantu languages, which collectively constitute the most prominent family of languages in sub-Saharan Africa.) Like the Indo-European migrations discussed in chapter 2, the Bantu migrations were not mass movements of peoples. Instead, they were intermittent and incremental processes that resulted in the gradual spread of Bantu languages and ethnic communities, as small groups moved to new territories and established settlements, which then became foundations for further expansion. By 1000 C.E.



MAP 3.3

Bantu migrations, 2000 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.

Note that Bantu migrations proceeded to the south and east of the original homeland of Bantu-speaking peoples.

To what extent do technological and environmental factors help to explain the extent of the Bantu migrations? Why did Bantu-speaking peoples not migrate also to the north and west of their homeland?

Bantu-speaking peoples occupied most of Africa south of the equator.

The precise motives of the early Bantu migrants remain shrouded in the mists of time, but it seems likely that population pressures drove the migrations. Two features of Bantu society were especially important for the earliest migrations. First, Bantu peoples made effective use of canoes in traveling the networks of the Niger, Congo, and other rivers. Canoes enabled Bantu to travel rapidly up and down the rivers, leapfrogging established communities and establishing new settlements at inviting spots on riverbanks. Second, agricultural surpluses enabled the Bantu population to increase more rapidly than the populations of hunting, gathering, and fishing peoples whom they encountered as they moved into new regions. When settlements grew uncomfortably large and placed strains on available resources, small groups left their parent communities and moved to new territories. Sometimes they moved to new sites along the rivers, but they often moved inland as well, encroaching on territories occupied by forest peoples. Bantu migrants placed pressures on the forest dwellers, and they most likely clashed with them over land resources. They learned a great deal about local environments from the forest peoples, however, and they also continued to trade regularly with them. Indeed, they often intermarried and absorbed forest peoples into Bantu agricultural society.

Iron and Migration After about 1000 B.C.E., the pace of Bantu migrations quickened, as Bantu peoples began to produce iron tools and weapons. Iron tools enabled Bantu cultivators to clear land and expand the zone of agriculture more effectively than before, and iron weapons strengthened the hand of Bantu groups against adversaries and competitors for lands or other resources. Thus iron metallurgy supported rapid population growth among the Bantu while also lending increased momentum to their continuing migrations, which in turn facilitated the spread of iron metallurgy throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa.

Early Agricultural Societies of Sub-Saharan Africa

Several smaller migrations took place alongside the spread of Bantu peoples in sub-Saharan Africa. Between 3500 and 1000 B.C.E., southern Kushite herders pushed into parts of east Africa (modern-day Kenya and Tanzania), while Sudanese cultivators and herders moved into the upper reaches of the Nile River (now southern Sudan and northern Uganda). Meanwhile, Mande-speaking peoples who cultivated African rice established communities along the Atlantic estuaries of west Africa, and other peoples speaking Niger-Congo languages spread the cultivation of okra from forest regions throughout much of west Africa.

Spread of Agriculture Among the most important effects of Bantu and other migrations was the establishment of agricultural societies throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa. Between 1000 and 500 B.C.E., cultivators extended the cultivation of yams and grains deep into east and south Africa (modern-day Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa), while herders introduced sheep and cattle to the region. About the same time, Bantu and other peoples speaking Niger-Congo languages spread the intensive cultivation of yams, oil palms, millet, and sorghum throughout west and central Africa while also introducing sheep, pigs, and cattle to the region. By the late centuries B.C.E., agriculture had reached almost all of sub-Saharan Africa except for densely forested regions and deserts.

As cultivation and herding spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, agricultural peoples built distinctive societies and cultural traditions. Most Bantu and other peoples as well lived in communities of a few hundred individuals led by chiefs. Many peoples recognized groups known as age sets, or age grades, consisting of individuals born within a few years of one another. Members of each age set jointly assumed responsibility for tasks appropriate to their levels of strength, energy, maturity, and experience. During their early years, for example, members of an age set might perform light public chores. At maturity, members jointly underwent elaborate initiation rites that introduced them to adult society. Older men cultivated fields and provided military service, while women tended to domestic chores and sometimes traded at markets. In later years, members of age sets served as community leaders and military officers.

Religious Beliefs African cultivators and herders also developed distinctive cultural and religious traditions. Both Sudanic and Niger-Congo peoples (including Bantu speakers), for example, held monotheistic religious beliefs by 5000 B.C.E. Sudanic peoples recognized a single, impersonal divine force that they regarded as the source of both good and evil. They believed that this divine force could take the form of individual spirits, and they often addressed the divine force through prayers to intermediary spirits. The divine force itself, however, was ultimately responsible for rewards and punishments meted out to humans. For their part, Niger-Congo peoples recognized a single god originally called Nyamba who created the world and established the principles that would govern its development and then stepped back and allowed the world to proceed on its own. Individuals did not generally address this distant creator god directly but, rather, offered their prayers to ancestor spirits and local territorial spirits believed to inhabit the world and influence the fortunes of living humans. Proper attention to these spirits would ensure good fortune, they believed, whereas their neglect would bring punishment or adversity from disgruntled spirits.

Individual communities did not always hold religious beliefs in the precise forms just outlined. Rather, they frequently borrowed elements from other communities and adapted their beliefs to changing circumstances or fresh understandings of the world. Migrations of Bantu and other peoples in particular resulted in a great deal of cultural mixing and mingling, and religious beliefs often spread to new communities in the wake of population movements. After

1000 B.C.E., for example, as they encountered Sudanic peoples and their reverence of a single divine force that was the source of good and evil, many Bantu peoples associated the god Nyamba with goodness. As a result, this formerly important creator god took on a new moral dimension that brought him closer to the lives of individuals. Thus, changing religious beliefs sometimes reflected widespread interactions among African societies.

CHRONOLOGY

9000 B.C.E.	Origins of Sudanic herding
7500 B.C.E.	Origins of Sudanic cultivation
3100 B.C.E.	Unification of Egypt
3100–2660 B.C.E.	Archaic Period of Egyptian history
2660–2160 B.C.E.	Egyptian Old Kingdom
2600–2500 B.C.E.	Era of pyramid building in Egypt
2500–1450 B.C.E.	Early kingdom of Kush with capital at Kerma
2000 B.C.E.	Beginnings of Bantu migrations
1550–1070 B.C.E.	Egyptian New Kingdom
1479–1425 B.C.E.	Reign of Pharaoh Tuthmosis III
1473–1458 B.C.E.	Reign of Queen Hatshepsut (coruler with Tuthmosis III)
1353–1335 B.C.E.	Reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten)
900 B.C.E.	Invention of iron metallurgy in sub-Saharan Africa
760 B.C.E.	Conquest of Egypt by King Kashta of Kush