

Books of Ancient Egypt The Pharaohs

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The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt

By Elizabeth Payne



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Then came a hot summer day in 1822—just twelve months after Napoleon had died in lonely exile on the island of St. Helena.

All that morning a young Frenchman named Jean François Champollion had been working over a sheaf of hieroglyphs on his desk. As the clock struck noon, he rose unsteadily to his feet.


Gathering up his papers, he rushed to a nearby library where his brother was working. Flinging his papers down on his brother's desk, Champollion cried: "*Je tiens l'affaire! Je tiens l'affaire!* [I've got it! I've got it!]"

And then he fainted dead away.

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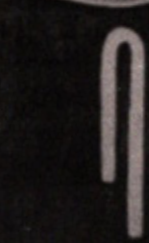
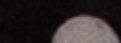
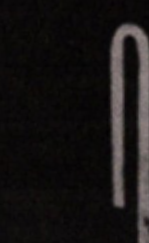
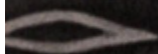
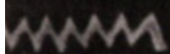
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The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt

Over the course of its long history, Egypt has been ruled by many different dynasties. The most famous of these are the pharaohs, who were the supreme rulers of the country. They were considered to be gods on earth, and their power was absolute. The pharaohs were responsible for the construction of the pyramids and other great works of ancient Egypt. They were also responsible for the development of the Egyptian civilization. The pharaohs were the most powerful and influential people in ancient Egypt. They were the ones who made the laws and decided the fate of the country. They were the ones who were worshipped by the people. They were the ones who were buried in the pyramids. They were the ones who were the most important people in ancient Egypt.

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The Rediscovery of Ancient Egypt

A.D. 1798 to A.D. 1822

On a sweltering August morning in the year 1799, the Egyptian sun beat down on a scene of frenzied activity in the Nile River Delta. There, not far from a little town called Rosetta, a company of French soldiers was digging with a speed born of desperation. They were members of young Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian Expeditionary Force. And they were under threat of attack from both land and sea.

All morning their commanding officer, Major Pierre Bouchard, had forced himself to move cheerfully among his men. But now, his back to his troops, he was staring bleakly out at the Mediterranean Sea. It was useless to go on acting as if all were well. The French army faced disaster. Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, which had begun so brilliantly, was ending in catastrophe.

Just twelve months earlier, Napoleon had conquered Egypt in a lightning campaign of three weeks' time. From that moment on, everything had gone wrong. England, fearing that French control of Egypt would

threaten her vital land and sea routes to India, had ordered her fleet to the Mediterranean. Shortly after Napoleon had entered Cairo in triumph, the British navy surprised the French fleet at anchor near Alexandria. In a fierce naval battle, the English blew up and sank most of Napoleon's ships, leaving Bonaparte and his forces stranded in Egypt.

Hard on the heels of this first calamity came a second. Egypt belonged to the Turks in 1798; it was part of their vast Ottoman Empire. Napoleon had assumed that the aged Turkish Empire was too enfeebled to fight his seizure of the Nile Valley. But Bonaparte was wrong. Not long after the British had destroyed the French fleet, the outraged sultan in Constantinople declared war on the upstart French general. Turkish troops and ships were dispatched southward to throw him out of Egypt.

And this was not all. Blockaded by the British and beset by the Turks, the stranded French faced still another enemy. Egypt's military aristocracy, the fierce Mameluke cavalrymen, refused to accept defeat. After their first rout by Napoleon, they had galloped off into the desert to regroup their forces. Now they were reported to be thundering back toward Cairo, bent on revenge. Faced with these three formidable foes, the desperate French were digging in wherever they found themselves.

"Major Bouchard!"

Behind Bouchard's back, a soldier had scrambled up over the top of his trench. There was a puzzled expression on his grimy, sweat-streaked face.

"Major Bouchard, sir!"

The call brought Bouchard back to the present. He turned, saw the beckoning soldier and made his way through the heat and dust and confusion to the man's side.

"Beg pardon, sir," the soldier said uncertainly. "It may be nothing, but would you have a look down there?"

Bouchard bent forward. In digging a trench, the soldier had uncovered the ruins of an old wall. Embedded among its crumbling yellow bricks—and winking up at Bouchard like a huge black diamond—was a chunk of polished stone. It was about two and a half feet across and three and a half feet high.

In spite of his troubles, Bouchard felt a flicker of interest. For the face of the stone seemed to be almost completely covered with a chiseled inscription. The Major jumped down into the trench for a closer look.

Squatting on his heels and narrowing his eyes against the sun's glare, Bouchard studied the stone with surprise. Its flat surface was divided into three sections. And each section was engraved with a block of writing in a different language.

Across the top of the stone were fourteen lines of what Bouchard recognized as hieroglyphs, the mysterious picture-writing used thousands of years ago by the ancient Egyptians. Directly below the hieroglyphs were thirty-two lines of a script Bouchard had never seen before. And crowded across the bottom of the stone were fifty-four lines of Greek.

Bouchard grunted and straightened up. The soldier

was watching him anxiously. "In view of General Bonaparte's order, sir," he said, "I thought . . ."

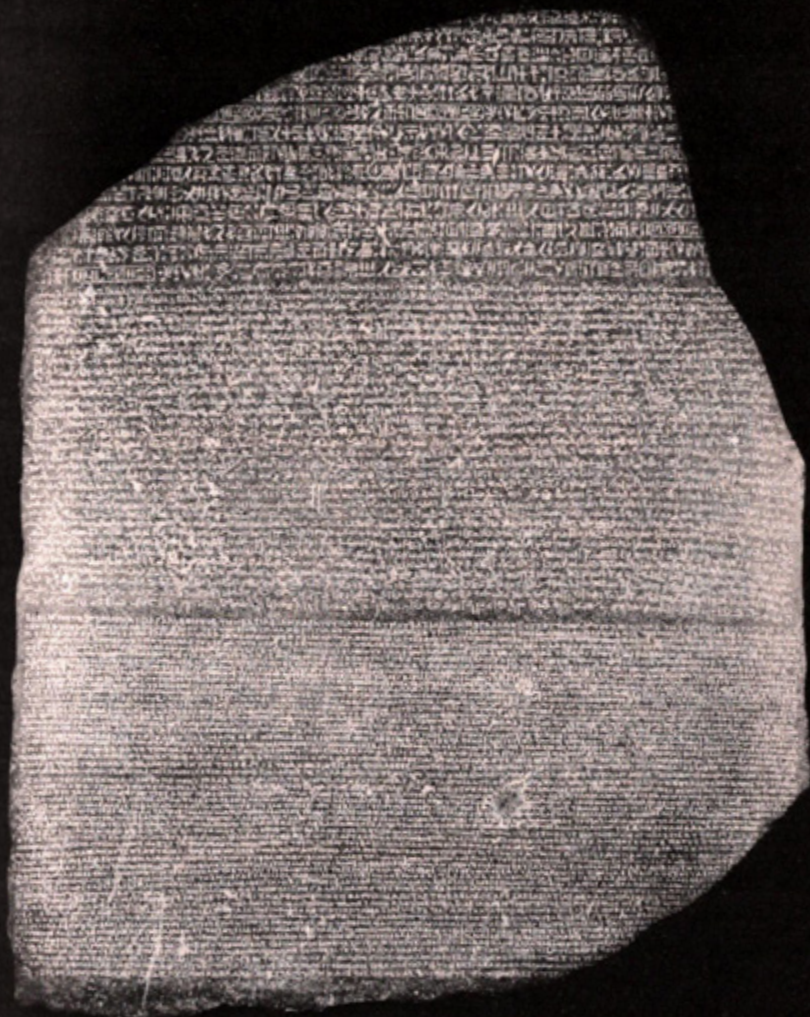
Bouchard cut him short with a nod of approval. Everyone in the expeditionary force knew of Napoleon's interest in ancient Egyptian history. Bonaparte had ordered his men to report at once any old curios or works of art they might come across in the course of their duties.

Well, Bouchard thought, the engraved chunk of stone was certainly ancient and undoubtedly a curio. But Napoleon was surely too hard-pressed at the moment to interest himself in an old fragment of black basalt. Still, an order was an order. With a shrug, Bouchard arranged to have the stone dug out of the ruined wall, and then reported the find to his superiors.

The black basalt was sent to Alexandria—and Bouchard forgot all about it. He had no idea that he and his soldier had made one of the most exciting archaeological discoveries of all time. For the Rosetta Stone, as the chunk of basalt came to be called, turned out to be the key to the lost history of ancient Egypt.

In Napoleon's day historians knew almost nothing about Egypt—past or present. It was a land the world had all but forgotten.

And yet once, long before the birth of Christ, Egypt had been the most famous and powerful country in the world. At a time in history when the ancestors of Western man still lived as semi-savages in the dense



forests of England and Europe, a great civilization had existed along the banks of the river Nile. Ruled over by awesome god-kings called Pharaohs, Egypt had been a land of bustling cities, golden palaces, huge stone temples, busy dock sides and luxurious country estates. Her people had been fun-loving and light-hearted, her nobles elegant and worldly and her gods the most powerful in all the world.

This astonishing civilization had endured for more than 3,000 years, and then gradually vanished from the face of the earth. Its cities had crumbled to dust. The meaning of its writing had been lost. The story of its people, its Pharaohs and its days of greatness had been forgotten.

All that historians could say with certainty was that "once upon a time" a great and powerful people had lived in the Nile Valley. In proof of this there was the Bible, which told of the bondage of the children of Israel to the mighty Pharaohs of Egypt, thousands of years ago. And there were the accounts of Greek and Roman historians, such as Herodotus, who had visited and described ancient Egypt in the days of her decline. Above all, there was the testimony of the giant, half-ruined temples and pyramids that still stood along the banks of the sleepy Nile.

But the ruins, the Greek and Roman writers, and the Bible had nothing trustworthy to say about how ancient Egyptian civilization had come into being, or how it had developed. Historians in Napoleon's time knew almost nothing about the great Pharaohs. Nor did they know

anything about the people who had lived in the Nile Valley so many thousands of years earlier. What had they and their god-kings been like? Whom had they worshiped? How had they lived out their daily lives? What had they thought of themselves and the world about them?

Napoleon wanted to know the answers to all these questions. So in addition to recruiting an army to invade the Nile Valley, he also persuaded more than 150 French scientists, artists and scholars to sail with him to Egypt. Many joined the expedition out of enthusiasm for Napoleon's plans to modernize Egypt. Others were inspired by Bonaparte's own intense curiosity about Egypt's ancient past. They signed on to investigate the ruined monuments along the Nile, and to gather material for a history of ancient Egypt.

This last was a bigger job than Napoleon and his scholars realized. For, as historians know today, there are only two reliable ways of learning anything about a long-vanished civilization. The first is by being able to read its language. The second is by scientific excavation of the often buried ruins of its villages and cities. And by the careful analysis of the artifacts, or objects of everyday use, found abandoned there—such artifacts as broken cooking pots and water containers, religious figurines, bits of jewelry and fragments of furniture.

But in Napoleon's day no one could read the writing of the ancient Egyptians: the secret of the hieroglyphs had been lost for 1,500 years. And archaeology, if it could be called that, had just been born.

Some years before Napoleon sailed for Egypt, an Italian peasant had uncovered an ancient wall when digging in his vineyard one day. The wall was part of the city of Pompeii, which had been buried under tons of hot ashes when Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79. In the years that followed, amateur enthusiasts—the world's first archaeologists—hacked their way down into the buried city. They excavated without plan or care, for today's painstaking archaeological techniques were, of course, unknown to them. As a result, they unwittingly destroyed almost as many priceless artifacts as they found.

But it was at Pompeii, nonetheless, that archaeology was born. It was to come of age in Egypt.

Once he had set up his own headquarters in captured Cairo, Napoleon established the Egyptian Institute as headquarters for his scholars. They were soon hard at work on their various projects.

Of them all, the French artist Dominique-Vivant Denon had the most exciting adventures in the months that followed. For when the defeated Egyptian cavalry galloped off into the desert to regroup its forces, Napoleon sent part of his army chasing after them. Denon went along as the representative of the Egyptian Institute.

As the French army followed its quarry deeper and deeper into Egypt, Denon began to have the eerie feeling that he was traveling straight into the past. He could



scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. For the entire Nile Valley, hitherto almost totally unexplored by modern man, was like a great outdoor museum.

Each day's march up river along the Nile brought new wonders to light. Denon came upon huge, half-ruined stone temples, many buried almost to their rooftops in drifted sand. He saw slender obelisks, some rising like giant needles against the clear Egyptian sky, others lying broken on the ground. He stood beneath temple columns so big around that one hundred men could stand atop each one. He lifted his eyes in astonishment to the battered faces of statues seventy feet high. He crept down into musty tombs and gazed by flickering candlelight at wall paintings as vivid as the day they had been brushed on, 3,000 years before. And he stared with fascinated horror into the leathery, lifelike faces of ancient mummies, which were the embalmed bodies of men who had died thousands of years earlier.

All of these sights moved Denon "to a delirium of imagination." Time and again he nearly lost his life as he lagged behind the army to make drawings of the wonders he saw. When he returned to Cairo ten months later, his notebooks were bulging. In addition to detailed drawings of the ruins, Denon had also made careful copies of the many hieroglyphic inscriptions he had found on temple walls and obelisks.

Denon's colleagues at the Egyptian Institute examined his sketchbooks and listened to his report with astonishment. If they had needed proof that a mighty civilization had once existed along the Nile, here it was. But the

ruins told only part of the story. The scholars knew by now that until they could read the mysterious hieroglyphs, the history of ancient Egypt would always remain a mystery.

A few days later—as if on cue—copies of the writing on the engraved chunk of black stone that Major Bouchard had found near Rosetta arrived at Institute headquarters.

They caused the liveliest excitement. For—from a description of the stone—two things were instantly clear to the scholars. First, the Rosetta Stone was part of a *stele*, a flat slab of stone on which the ancients used to engrave proclamations of importance. And second, this particular stele was trilingual. That is, the identical proclamation had been engraved on its face in three different languages.

Major Bouchard's superiors had recognized this and had realized its importance. For if all three languages on the stone said the same thing, and if any *one* of those three languages could be read, then the other two could probably be deciphered by transliteration. That is, letters and words in the known language could be matched up with letters and words in the unknown languages.

All of Napoleon's scholars could read Greek. In a matter of minutes, they had translated the fifty-four lines across the bottom of the stone. The words were a testimonial in praise of Pharaoh Ptolemy V for gifts he had given the Egyptian temples in 196 B.C.

The scholars' eyes flew to the hieroglyphs copied from the top of the stone. The meaning of the individual

pictures was as mysterious as ever. But they now knew exactly what the whole block of hieroglyphic writing said. All that remained, they thought, was to match up each drawing to the known Greek letter below.

Napoleon was as excited as his scholars by this hope of at last deciphering the writing of the ancient Egyptians. In spite of his perilous military situation, he found time to have the writing on the Rosetta Stone copied and sent back to language experts in France.

Not long after this, Napoleon and most of his scholars were back in France themselves. The Egyptian campaign had proved a failure, and Bonaparte was urgently needed in Paris. Still later, the French army in Egypt came to terms with the British and the Turks, and the expeditionary force was brought home. The Rosetta Stone fell into English hands. Today it is one of the prize possessions of the British Museum in London.

During the next twenty years, as Napoleon's star rose and fell on the battlefields of Europe, scholars wracked their brains over the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone. They had been able to decipher the unknown middle block of text without too much difficulty. The script was a modernized form of hieroglyphics called Demotic, which was written by the Egyptians of Pharaoh Ptolemy V's day.

But try as they might, scholars could make no sense of the hieroglyphs. The little pictures had no meaning at all when matched up to either the Demotic or Greek texts.



"Hope has been abandoned of deciphering hieroglyphs," one language expert announced gloomily. And indeed, as scholars bogged down and fell to wrangling among themselves, it began to look as though the world would never know what the ancient Egyptians had to say about themselves.

Then came a hot summer day in 1822—just twelve months after Napoleon had died in lonely exile on the island of St. Helena.

All that morning a young Frenchman named Jean François Champollion had been working over a sheaf of hieroglyphs on his desk. As the clock struck noon, he rose unsteadily to his feet. Gathering up his papers, he rushed to a nearby library where his brother was working. Flinging his papers down on his brother's desk, Champollion cried: "*Je tiens l'affaire! Je tiens l'affaire!* [I've got it! I've got it!]"

And then he fainted dead away.

After years of painstaking labor, Jean François Champollion had at last deciphered the hieroglyphs. Not long before Champollion started to work, earlier scholars had made an important discovery. They had noticed that Pharaoh Ptolemy's name appeared five times in the Greek section at the bottom of the stone. And up in the hieroglyphic section there were five sets of identical picture signs, each encircled by an oval line. The scholars guessed that these encircled sets of hieroglyphs, which they called cartouches, spelled the name Ptolemy in ancient Egyptian. If this were so, they had learned the picture signs for seven letters of the alphabet.

It was a great step forward but, curiously enough, scholars failed to follow it through.

Champollion, however, began to collect copies of cartouches, which were now known to contain the names of ancient Egypt's kings and queens. In one cartouche that reached his desk, he recognized five of the same picture signs that appeared in Ptolemy's name. Leaving blank spaces for the unknown hieroglyphs, and filling in the signs he had recognized, Champollion's new cartouche read:

— L E O P — T — —

Champollion studied it for a moment, made a guess and then filled in the blank spaces. Now the cartouche spelled out:

K L E O P A T R A

If his guess was right (and it was), Champollion had learned the picture signs for three more letters of the alphabet. The Egyptians had no letter C.

Had intelligent guesswork like this been all there was to deciphering the hieroglyphs, the job would probably have been done long before Champollion's time. But when Champollion at last understood the grammar and syntax of ancient Egyptian writing, it was easy to see why earlier scholars had bogged down in despair.

For, as Champollion discovered, the Egyptian language contained an alphabet of twenty-four letter signs. But it did not form its words from letters alone, as modern languages do. Ancient Egyptian contained

literally hundreds upon hundreds of additional hieroglyphs, some standing for sounds, some for concrete objects, some for abstract ideas. Champollion's genius somehow made order out of this seeming chaos. And not long after he fainted at his brother's feet on that summer day in 1822, he was able to give the world a tentative ancient Egyptian grammar and dictionary.

The excitement throughout educated Europe at the news of Champollion's feat can scarcely be imagined. Napoleon's scholars had by this time published thirty-six illustrated volumes of the wonders they had seen in the Nile Valley. The books had created the greatest enthusiasm. Americans and Europeans, whose knowledge of the ancient world had been limited almost entirely to Greece and Rome, were made dramatically aware that civilization had begun in Egypt and the Near East. Rich and highly developed cultures had once flourished there. Word that Champollion had deciphered the hieroglyphs gave hope that these cultures—or at least one of them—could be resurrected from the dead.

In the years that followed, all kinds of men flocked to Egypt. Some were sightseers, who voyaged up the Nile by excursion steamer to view the ancient monuments. Others were dealers and private collectors, on the lookout for ancient objects to buy and sell. Many were archaeologists.

Some of these archaeologists went to Egypt on their own; others were sent out by the great museums of Europe and America. They came prepared to dig up the past. For the great temples that Denon had drawn,

drifted half over with sand, gave promise that other ancient marvels might lie buried beneath the desert.

Champollion had given archaeologists the ability to read the words of ancient Egypt's poets, storytellers, priests and Pharaohs. The archaeologists themselves were to write the rest of ancient Egyptian history with their spades. From Napoleon's day to this, their excavations in the Nile Valley have gradually brought to light the story of one of the world's first and greatest civilizations—the story of the people and Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt.

The First Egyptians and the Dead Demigods

From between 25,000 and
10,000 B.C. to 3200 B.C.

Some eighty or ninety years after Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, a group of archaeologists knelt one day around a shallow grave at the edge of the Egyptian desert. In the grave lay a skeleton, curled up on its side as though asleep. Beneath the body were the remains of a mat of woven rushes. And within reach of the hands were a few flint tools and some ancient clay pots.

The archaeologists stared silently down at the brittle brown bones. For a moment they forgot the hot Egyptian sun and the clouds of flies that danced in front of their eyes. For here, wonderfully preserved by Egypt's hot, dry climate, were the remains of a man who had lived in the Nile Valley some 7,000 years earlier.

Archaeologists were to find many of these ancient, primitive graves during their excavations in Egypt. The bones and artifacts they contained showed that the ancestors of the Pharaohs had been a small, slender

people with dark, wavy hair. They had lived by hunting, and must have believed in some form of life after death. For they were buried with the tools and cooking pots they had used in this world and would presumably have need of in the next. These people were not the first inhabitants of the Nile Valley. But they were the first of whom any human trace had been found.

By this time archaeologists knew that the very first Egyptians of all had been forced into the valley by changes in the world's climate that took place sometime between 25,000 and 10,000 B.C. Before then, the Nile had not been a river at all. It had been a huge lake, or series of lakes. And the empty deserts that now stretch along the coast of North Africa had been covered with grassy plains and green jungles. On the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, most of Europe lay frozen beneath a great sheet of ice.

Then—no one knows for certain why—the world grew warmer and drier. Europe's ice cap began to thaw and recede. Rain stopped falling in the south, and the plains and jungles of the North African coast started to wither and die for lack of water.

As the drought intensified, the great Nile lakes began to shrink and dry up. In the end, nothing was left of them except a narrow river, about half a mile wide. It flowed to the sea at the bottom of the canyon it had once filled to the brim. This canyon—Egypt's famous Nile Valley—was about 750 miles long and from 12 to 31 miles wide. High limestone cliffs enclosed it on either side for most of its length. But about one hundred miles

from the Mediterranean, these cliffs leveled off and the river divided into several channels. It then meandered down to the sea through a wide, fan-shaped tract of marshy lowland called the Delta.

Into this long, narrow canyon, to the banks of the river that was fast becoming their only source of water, moved the men and beasts of the dying North African plains. The valley must have seemed a watery paradise to them. The river teemed with fish. And the high reeds that choked its swampy banks were alive with wild ducks, wild geese and water birds of all kinds.

The great beasts which were the kings of this long-ago world entered the valley first. Thundering herds of giant bison, rhinoceroses and elephants led the way. Then came hundreds upon hundreds of the smaller animals—wild pigs and dogs, gazelles and donkeys, hyenas and goats.

And after the animals crept the men of that day. Driven by hunger and thirst, they made their way down into the valley by twos and threes or sometimes in loosely organized tribes. They lived on roots and small game, slept in treetops or caves and carried rough-hewn stone tools and weapons. They seemed scarcely more human than the wild animals they so feared.

Yet these same men, in the next several thousand years, took one of the most dramatic steps forward in the history of mankind. They became civilized.

In a world largely populated by near-savages, the Nile Valley men learned to plant seeds and grow crops. From



wandering hunters who slept where the night found them, they became farmers living in settled villages. They learned to tame and use some of the least fearsome of the wild animals, such as donkeys and goats and oxen. They discovered metal, and were able to make copper instead of stone tools and weapons. They learned to cook and sew, to spin and weave, to sculpt and paint, to add and subtract. Most exciting of all, they learned how to read and write.

To archaeologists, it seemed almost a miracle that the Nile Valley men had learned to do all these things in such a short time. Several thousand years is a very short time indeed, compared to the hundreds of thousands of years that man had lived upon the earth in a state of almost complete savagery.

How and why had it happened?

Archaeologists cannot be absolutely sure. But their best guess is that the Nile River had a great deal to do with it. It behaved in a way that almost forced the Egyptians to use their wits if they were to survive, even as primitive farmers. And once man began to use his wits to control his environment, instead of letting his environment control him, civilization was not far behind.

The behavior of the river Nile has not changed in thousands of years. In ancient times, just as today, it went into full flood each year. Swollen by heavy seasonal rains at its sources deep in Africa, the river rolled north across the continent toward the Mediterranean Sea at twenty to thirty feet above its normal level. By the time it

reached the upper borders of Egypt, most of its force had been spent. And so, instead of churning destructively down through the valley, it simply rose in a gentle swell and spread out over the valley floor. It covered the land for two to five or six miles on either side of its banks.

And there it stayed for four months, laden with the mud and silt it had gathered up on its long journey down into Egypt. When the flood waters at last receded and the river returned to normal, this mud and silt were left behind on the land. They made, and make today, one of the richest fertilizers in the world.

The ancient Pharaohs often called Egypt the Red Land and the Black Land, so startling was the contrast between the bands of black soil along the river banks and the reddish desert scrub that rose to the valley cliffs beyond.

The ancients also called the valley the Land of Kem. For *kemi* was the Egyptians' name for the river-borne silt on which their very lives as farmers came to depend. Without *kemi* there would be no Egypt at all. The Nile Valley would be as barren and unproductive as the deserts that surround it. This is what the ancient Greek historian Herodotus meant when he wrote that Egypt was "an acquired country, the gift of the river."

To the earliest Egyptians, however, the Nile's annual gift of *kemi* was more of a problem than a blessing. With luck, they could grow one quick crop after the flood waters receded. But more often than not, the rich black soil was of little use to them because there was almost no rainfall in Egypt. And without rain, the fertile *kemi* dried

out and caked in a matter of weeks under the hot desert sun.

Faced with this problem, the prehistoric Egyptians first appealed to their gods for help. But prayer and sacrifice brought no more than an inch of rain (if that) each year. Next the valley men tried bringing river water to their fields in containers. This worked well enough for the little plots close to the Nile. But as farming increased, many plots were inland from the river. And so another solution had to be found.

"Who first?" is a question archaeologists often ask themselves as they study the distant past. Who first among the valley men, they wonder, realized that Egypt's lack of rainfall was of little importance—if the Nile waters could be trapped at flood time and stored in canals between the fields, ready to use on the crops when needed? Who first thought up what is known today as irrigation?

No one knows. All archaeologists can say is that sometime in the shadowy past the prehistoric Egyptians learned how to irrigate their fields. And from that time on, life began to quicken in the valley. Irrigation seemed to start a chain reaction by which one civilizing force led to another.

Before irrigation, for instance, the descendants of the first Egyptians had banded together in small villages along the river banks. There each man did everything for himself. He made his own tools and cooking pots. He built his own hut from river mud and reeds. He hunted his own game, fished for his own supper and haphazardly

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