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Early Agricultural Societies of Sub-Saharan Africa

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 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 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. Many 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

OPPOSITE: A manuscript painting from about 1000 B.C.E. depicts Anubis, the jackal-headed Egyptian god of mummification, tending to a mummy before a sepulchral pyramid.

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.

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.

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 both 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.

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 muck, and those alluvial deposits 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

Early Sudanic Agriculture

Climatic Change

The Nile River Valley

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



arid, cultivators flocked to the Nile valley and 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, since 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 Nile's shores from the Mediterranean in the north to the river's fourth cataract in the south.

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

By 3500 B.C.E. political and economic competition fueled numerous skirmishes and small-scale wars between the Nile kingdoms. Some kingdoms overcame their neighbors and gradually expanded until they controlled sizable territories. One expansive kingdom was Ta-Seti, a strong Nubian realm that flourished about 3400 to 3200 B.C.E. and extended its rule north of the Nile's first cataract into Egypt. When Ta-Seti declined, the local kingdoms of southern Egypt were in a strong position to increase their power, since Egypt's broad floodplains offered much more arable land and supported much larger populations than Nubian territories to the south.

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 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.

Political Organization

Menes



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.

a unified kingdom much larger and more powerful than any other Nile state. Tradition holds 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 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 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, 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 also contributed to the construction of the pyramids.

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

*The Archaic Period
and the Old Kingdom*

*Relations between
Egypt and Nubia*



Funerary sculpture from a tomb in Upper Egypt dating from about 2200–2000 B.C.E. depicts Nenu, a Nubian mercenary soldier who served in the Egyptian army, together with his Egyptian wife, their two sons, a servant, and two pet dogs.

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.

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

*The Early
Kingdom of Kush*

(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 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 Middle Kingdom

Toward the end of the Old Kingdom, high agricultural productivity made several regions of Egypt so prosperous and powerful that they were able to ignore the pharaohs and pursue local interests. As a result, the central state declined and eventually disappeared altogether during a long season of political upheaval and social unrest (2160–2040 B.C.E.). Pharaonic authority returned with the establishment of the Middle Kingdom (2040–1640 B.C.E.). Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom were not as powerful as their predecessors of the Old Kingdom, but they effectively stabilized Egypt and supervised relations with neighboring lands of Nubia, north Africa, and Syria.

The Hyksos

Gradually, however, Egypt came under the pressure of foreign peoples from southwest Asia, particularly 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. The Hyksos themselves probably did not often travel south of the Nile delta in large numbers, but they claimed authority over the whole of Egypt and ruled the land through Egyptian intermediaries.

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 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

Hyksos (HICK-sohs)

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.

The majesty of [Pharaoh] Mernere, my lord, sent me together with my father . . . to [the Upper Nubian kingdom of] Yam to open the way to that country. I did it in seven months; I brought from it all kinds of beautiful and rare gifts, and was praised for it greatly.

His majesty sent me a second time alone. . . . I came down [the Nile] bringing gifts from that country in great quantity, the likes of which had never before been brought back to this land [Egypt]. . . .

Then his majesty sent me a third time to Yam. . . . I came down with three hundred donkeys laden with incense, ebony, . . . panther skins, elephant's tusks, throw sticks, and all sorts of good products.

[The letter of Pharaoh Neferkare to Harkhuf:] Notice has been taken of this dispatch of yours which you made for the King at the Palace, to let one know that you have come down in safety from Yam with the army that was with you. You have said in this dispatch of yours that you have brought all kinds of great and beautiful gifts. . . . You have said in this dispatch of yours that you have brought a pygmy of the god's dances from the land of the horizon-dwellers [the region of Nubia southeast of Egypt], like the pygmy whom the [royal official] Bawerded brought from Punt [Ethiopia and Somalia] in the time of King Isesi. You have said to my majesty that his like has never been brought by anyone who [visited] Yam previously.

Truly you know how to do what your lord loves and praises. Truly you spend day and night planning to do what your lord loves, praises, and commands. His majesty will provide you many worthy honors for the benefit of your son's son for all time, so that all people

will say, when they hear what my majesty did for you: "Does anything equal what was done for the sole companion Harkhuf when he came down from Yam, on account of the vigilance he showed in doing what his lord loved, praised, and commanded?"

Come north to the residence at once! Hurry and bring with you this pygmy whom you brought from the land of the horizon-dwellers live, hale, and healthy, for the dances of the god, to gladden the heart, to delight the heart of King Neferkare who lives forever! When he goes down with you into the ship, get worthy men to be around him on deck, lest he fall into the water! When he lies down at night, get worthy men to lie around him in his tent. Inspect ten times at night! My majesty desires to see this pygmy more than the gifts of the mine-land [the Sinai peninsula] and of Punt!

When you arrive at the residence and this pygmy is with you live, hale, and healthy, my majesty will do great things for you, more than was done for the [royal official] Bawerded in the time of King Isesi, in accordance with my majesty's wish to see this pygmy. Orders have been brought to the chief of the new towns and the companion, overseer of priests to command that supplies be furnished from what is under the charge of each from every storage depot and every temple that has not been exempted.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

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

SOURCE: Miriam Lichtheim, ed. *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, 1: 25–27.

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?



Egyptian Imperialism

Old Kingdom, but they erected numerous temples, palaces, and monumental statues to advertise their power and authority.

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 Egyp-



A wall painting from the tomb of an Egyptian imperial official in Nubia depicts a delegation of Nubians bringing tribute in the forms of exotic beasts, animal skins, and rings of gold.

tian forces out of Nubia and southwest Asia, then Kushite and Assyrian armies invaded Egypt itself.

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 Egypt to Assyrian rule. After the mid-sixth century B.C.E., like Mesopotamia, Egypt fell to a series of foreign conquerors who built vast empires throughout southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean region, including Egypt and north Africa.

The Revived Kingdom of Kush

The Formation of Complex Societies and Sophisticated Cultural Traditions

As in Mesopotamia, cities and the congregation of dense populations encouraged the emergence of specialized labor in the early agricultural societies of Africa. This development was particularly noticeable in Egypt, but specialized labor was a prominent feature also of societies in the southern reaches of the Nile River valley. Clearly defined social classes emerged throughout the Nile valley, and both Egyptians and Nubians

built patriarchal societies that placed authority largely in the hands of adult males. The Egyptian economy was especially productive, and because of both its prosperity and its geographic location, Egypt figured as a center of trade, linking lands in southwest Asia, the eastern Mediterranean, and sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile, like southwest Asia, the Nile valley was a site of sophisticated cultural development. Writing systems appeared in both Egypt and Nubia, and writing soon became a principal medium of literary expression and religious reflection as well as a means for preserving governmental records and commercial information.

The Emergence of Cities and Stratified Societies

Cities of the Nile Valley: Egypt

Cities were not as prominent in early societies of the Nile River valley as they were in ancient Mesopotamia. In the Nile valley, populations clustered mostly in numerous agricultural villages that traded regularly with their neighbors up and down the river. Nevertheless, several major cities emerged and guided affairs in both Egypt and Nubia. The conqueror Menes founded Memphis as early as 3100 B.C.E. Because of its location at the head of the Nile delta, Memphis was a convenient site for a capital: Menes and many later pharaohs as well ruled over a unified Egypt from Memphis. Besides the capital, other cities also played important roles in Egyptian affairs. Thebes, for example, was a prominent political center even before the unification of Egypt. After unification, Thebes became the administrative center of Upper Egypt, and several pharaohs even took the city as their capital. Heliopolis, meaning “City of the Sun,” was the headquarters of a sun cult near Memphis and a principal cultural center of ancient Egypt. Founded about 2900 B.C.E., Heliopolis reached the height of its influence during the New Kingdom, when it was the site of an enormous temple to the 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 contested 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



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 building blocks.

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.

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

Patriarchal Society

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.

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, while others reigned jointly with male kings, and many governed also in the capacity of a regent known as the *kandake* (root of the name 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, stone-cutting, 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.

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



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.

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 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.

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.

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

Transportation

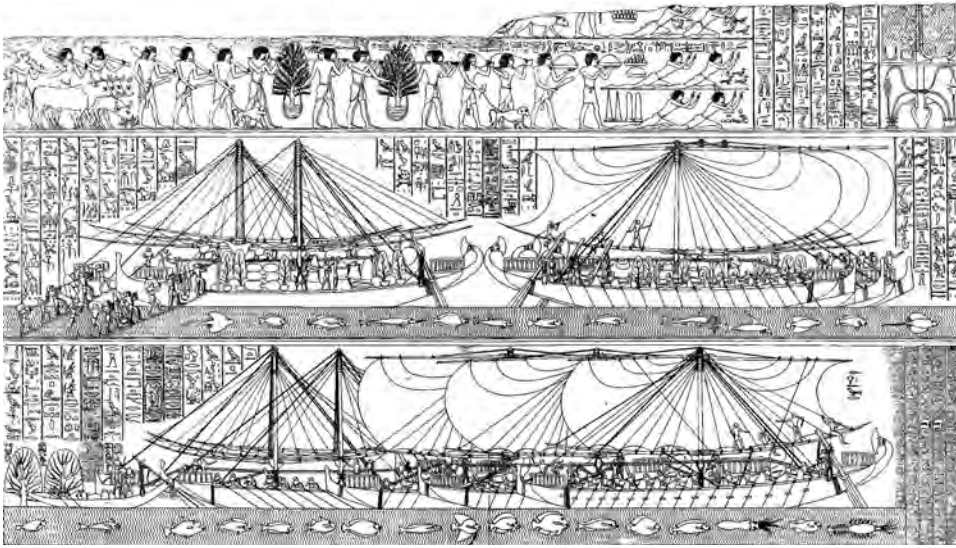
Trade Networks



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. Many wall and tomb paintings confirm the accuracy of this model.

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.

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 ex-



Queen Hatshepsut's fleet takes on cargo at Punt. Stevedores 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.

change for cedar Egyptians offered gold, silver, linen textiles, leather goods, and dried foods such as lentils.

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

Early Writing in the Nile Valley

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 also 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.

Hieroglyphic Writing



A painted limestone sculpture from the Old Kingdom depicts an Egyptian scribe writing on papyrus.

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 during the Middle Kingdom 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

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 and the Middle Kingdom, priests increasingly 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.

Amon and Re

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.

Aten and Monotheism

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.

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 yearning for 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 Middle and New Kingdoms, 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 preservation of the body, a variety of religious cults promised to lead individuals of all classes to immortality.

Mummification

Sources from the Past

The Great Hymn to Aten

After the death of Pharaoh Akhenaten, priests of Amon destroyed temples to Aten and all public inscriptions singing his praises. Yet many private inscriptions survived in tombs of priests and royal officials who died while in service at the new royal capital of Akhetaten. In excavating these tombs, archaeologists have brought to light many texts praising Aten and outlining the monotheistic beliefs surrounding his cult. Most famous of these inscriptions is the text known as “The Great Hymn to Aten.”

Splendid you rise in heaven’s lightland,
O living Aten, creator of life!
When you have dawned in eastern lightland,
You fill every land with your beauty.
You are beauteous, great radiant,
High over every land;
Your rays embrace the lands,
To the limit of all that you made. . . .
When you set in western lightland,
Earth is in darkness as if in death;
One sleeps in chambers, heads covered,
One eye does not see another.
Were they robbed of their goods,
That are under their heads,
People would not remark it.
Every lion comes from its den,
All the serpents bite;
Darkness hovers, earth is silent,
As their maker rests in lightland.
Earth brightens when you dawn in lightland.
When you shine as Aten of daytime;
As you dispel the dark,
As you cast your rays,
The Two Lands [of Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt]
are in festivity.
Awake they stand on their feet,
You have roused them;
Bodies cleansed, clothed,

Their arms adore your appearance.
The entire land sets out to work. . . .
How many are your deeds,
Though hidden from sight,
O Sole God beside whom there is none!
You made the earth as you wished, you alone,
All peoples, herds, and flocks;
All upon earth that walk on legs,
All on high that fly on wings,
The lands of Khor and Kush,
The land of Egypt. . . .
Your rays nurse all fields,
When you shine they live, they grow for you;
You made the seasons to foster all that you made,
Winter to cool them, heat that they taste you.
You made the far sky to shine therein,
To behold all that you made;
You alone, shining in your form of living Aten,
Risen, radiant, distant, near.
You made millions of forms from yourself alone,
Towns, villages, fields, the river’s course;
All eyes observe you upon them,
For you are the Aten of daytime on high.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

As conceived in “The Great Hymn to Aten,” what was the role of Aten as creator and sustainer of life on earth?

SOURCE: Miriam Lichtheim, ed. *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 3 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, 2: 96–99.

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



Osiris (seated at right) receives a recently deceased individual, while attendants weigh the heart of another individual against a feather. This illustration comes from a papyrus copy of the *Book of the Dead* that was buried with a royal mummy.

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 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 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



Nubian Religious Beliefs

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 Sebewyameker). Although often associated with Osiris, Sebiuameker was a Meroitic god with no exact counterpart in Egypt.

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.

Bantu Migrations and Early Agricultural Societies of Sub-Saharan Africa

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 forest, and after 2000 B.C.E. they expanded rapidly to the south 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 col-



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 considerations 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?

lectively 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. 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 human beings. 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 distant 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.

Like other world regions, Africa was a land in which peoples of different societies regularly traded, communicated, and interacted with one another from ancient times. African agriculture and herding first emerged in the Sudan, then spread both to the Nile River valley and to arable lands throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Agricultural crops and domesticated animals from southwest Asia soon made their way into the Nile valley. With its broad floodplains, Egypt became an especially productive land, while Nubia supported a smaller but flourishing society. Throughout the Nile valley, abundant agricultural surpluses supported dense populations and supported the construction of prosperous societies with sophisticated cultural traditions. Elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, populations were less dense, but the migrations of Bantu and other peoples facilitated the spread of agriculture, and later iron metallurgy as well, throughout most of the region. Meanwhile, the Nile River served as a route of trade and communication linking Egypt and the Mediterranean basin to the north with the Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa to the south. Only in the context of migration, trade, communication, and interaction is it possible to understand the early development of African societies.

C H R O N O L O G Y	
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
2040–1640 B.C.E.	Egyptian Middle Kingdom
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

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