# ANCIENT EGYPT

**BY**

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CHAPTER 1 THE LAND OF EGYPT.

In shape Egypt is like a lily with a crooked stem. A broad blossom terminates it at its upper end; a button of a bud projects from the stalk a little below the blossom, on the left-hand side. The broad blossom is the Delta, extending from Aboosir to Tineh, a direct distance of a hundred and eighty miles, which the projection of the coast—the graceful swell of the petals—enlarges to two hundred and thirty. The bud is the Fayoum, a natural depression in the hills that shut in the Nile valley on the west, which has been rendered cultivable for many thousands of years by the introduction into it of the Nile water, through a canal known as the "Bahr Yousouf." The long stalk of the lily is the Nile valley itself, which is a ravine scooped in the rocky soil for seven hundred miles from the First Cataract to the apex of the Delta, sometimes not more than a mile broad, never more than eight or ten miles. No other country in the world is so strangely shaped, so long compared to its width, so straggling, so hard to govern from a single centre.

At the first glance, the country seems to divide itself into two strongly contrasted regions; and this was the original impression which it made upon its inhabitants. The natives from a very early time designated their land as "the two lands," and represented it by a hieroglyph in which the form used to express "land" was doubled. The kings were called "chiefs of the Two Lands," and wore two crowns, as being kings of two countries. The Hebrews caught up the idea, and though they sometimes called Egypt "Mazor" in the singular number, preferred commonly to designate it by the dual form "Mizraim," which means "the two Mazors." These "two Mazors," "two Egypts," or "two lands," were, of course, the blossom and the stalk, the broad tract upon the Mediterranean known as "Lower Egypt," or "the Delta," and the long narrow valley that lies, like a green snake, to the south, which bears the name of "Upper Egypt," or "the Said." Nothing is more striking than the contrast between these two regions. Entering Egypt from the Mediterranean, or from Asia by the caravan route, the traveller sees stretching before him an apparently boundless plain, wholly unbroken by natural elevations, generally green with crops or with marshy plants, and canopied by a cloudless sky, which rests everywhere on a distant flat horizon. An absolute monotony surrounds him. No alternation of plain and highland, meadow and forest, no slopes of hills, or hanging woods, or dells, or gorges, or cascades, or rushing streams, or babbling rills, meet his gaze on any side; look which way he will, all is sameness, one vast smooth expanse of rich alluvial soil, varying only in being cultivated or else allowed to lie waste. Turning his back with something of weariness on the dull uniformity of this featureless plain, the wayfarer proceeds southwards, and enters, at the distance of a hundred miles from the coast, on an entirely new scene. Instead of an illimitable prospect meeting him on every side, he finds himself in a comparatively narrow vale, up and down which the eye still commands an extensive view, but where the prospect on either side is blocked at the distance of a few miles by rocky ranges of hills, white or yellow or tawny, sometimes drawing so near as to threaten an obstruction of the river course, sometimes receding so far as to leave some miles of cultivable soil on either side of the stream. The rocky ranges, as he approaches them, have a stern and forbidding aspect. They rise for the most part, abruptly in bare grandeur; on their craggy sides grows neither moss nor heather; no trees clothe their steep heights. They seem intended, like the mountains that enclosed the abode of Rasselas, to keep in the inhabitants of the vale within their narrow limits, and bar them out from any commerce or acquaintance with the regions beyond.

Such is the twofold division of the country which impresses the observer strongly at the first. On a longer sojourn and a more intimate familiarity, the twofold division gives place to one which is threefold. The lower differs from the upper valley, it is a sort of debatable region, half plain, half vale; the cultivable surface spreads itself out more widely, the enclosing hills recede into the distance; above all, to the middle tract belongs the open space of the Fayoum nearly fifty miles across in its greatest diameter, and containing an area of four hundred square miles. Hence, with some of the occupants of Egypt a triple division has been preferred to a twofold one, the Greeks interposing the "Heptanomis" between the Thebais and the Delta, and the Arabs the "Vostani" between the Said and the Bahari, or "country of the sea."

It may be objected to this description, that the Egypt which it presents to the reader is not the Egypt of the maps. Undoubtedly it is not. The maps give the name of Egypt to a broad rectangular space which they mark out in the north-eastern corner of Africa, bounded on two sides by the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and on the two others by two imaginary lines which the map-makers kindly draw for us across the sands of the desert. But "this Egypt," as has been well observed, "is a fiction of the geographers, as untrue to fact as the island Atlantis of Greek legend, or the Lyonnesse of mediæval romance, both sunk beneath the ocean to explain their disappearance. The true Egypt of the old monuments, of the Hebrews, of the Greeks and Romans, of the Arabs, and of its own people in this day, is a mere fraction of this vast area of the maps, nothing more than the valley and plain watered by the Nile, for nearly seven hundred miles by the river's course from the Mediterranean southwards."[[1]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15663/15663-h/15663-h.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22Footnote_1_1) The great wastes on either side of the Nile valley are in no sense Egypt, neither the undulating sandy desert to the west, nor the rocky and gravelly highland to the east, which rises in terrace after terrace to a height, in some places, of six thousand feet. Both are sparsely inhabited, and by tribes of a different race from the Egyptian—tribes whose allegiance to the rulers of Egypt is in the best times nominal, and who for the most part spurn the very idea of submission to authority.

Though thus useful, beneficent, and indeed essential to the existence of Egypt, the Nile can scarcely be said to add much to the variety of the landscape or to the beauty of the scenery. It is something, no doubt, to have the sight of water in a land where the sun beats down all day long with unremitting force till the earth is like a furnace of iron beneath a sky of molten brass. But the Nile is never clear. During the inundation it is deeply stained with the red argillaceous soil brought down from the Abyssinian highlands. At other seasons it is always more or less tinged with the vegetable matter which it absorbs on its passage from Lake Victoria to Khartoum; and this vegetable matter, combined with Its depth and volume, gives it a dull deep hue, which prevents it from having the attractiveness of purer and more translucent streams. The Greek name, Neilos, and the Hebrew, Sichor, are thought to embody this attribute of the mighty river, and to mean "dark blue" or "blue-black," terms sufficiently expressive of the stream's ordinary colour. Moreover, the Nile is too wide to be picturesque. It is seldom less than a mile broad from the point where it enters Egypt, and running generally between flat shores it scarcely reflects anything, unless it be the grey-blue sky overhead, or the sails of a passing pleasure boat.

The size of Egypt, within the limits which have been here assigned to it, is about eleven thousand four hundred square miles, or less than that of any European State, except Belgium, Saxony, and Servia. Magnitude is, however, but an insignificant element in the greatness of States—witness Athens, Sparta, Rhodes, Genoa, Florence, Venice. Egypt is the richest and most productive land in the whole world. In its most flourishing age we are told that it contained twenty thousand cities. It deserved to be called, more (probably) than even Belgium, "one great town." But its area was undoubtedly small. Still, as little men have often taken the highest rank among warriors, so little States have filled a most important place in the world's history. Palestine was about the size of Wales; the entire Peloponnese was no larger than New Hampshire; Attica had nearly the same area as Cornwall. Thus the case of Egypt does not stand by itself, but is merely one out of many exceptions to what may perhaps be called the general rule.

CHAPTER 2 THE PEOPLE OF EGYPT.

Where the Egyptians came from, is a difficult question to answer. Ancient speculators, when they could not derive a people definitely from any other, took refuge in the statement, or the figment, that they were the children of the soil which they had always occupied. Modern theorists may say, if it please them, that they were evolved out of the monkeys that had their primitive abode on that particular portion of the earth's surface. Monkeys, however, are not found everywhere; and we have no evidence that in Egypt they were ever indigenous, though, as pets, they were very common, the Egyptians delighting in keeping them. Such evidence as we have reveals to us the man as anterior to the monkey in the land of Mizraim Thus we are thrown back on the original question—Where did the man, or race of men, that is found in Egypt at the dawn of history come from?

It is generally answered that they came from Asia; but this is not much more than a conjecture. The physical type of the Egyptians is different from that of any known Asiatic nation. The Egyptians had no traditions that at all connected them with Asia. Their language, indeed, in historic times was partially Semitic, and allied to the Hebrew, the Phœnician, and the Aramaic; but the relationship was remote, and may be partly accounted for by later intercourse, without involving original derivation. The fundamental character of the Egyptian in respect of physical type, language, and tone of thought, is Nigritic. The Egyptians were not negroes, but they bore a resemblance to the negro which is indisputable. Their type differs from the Caucasian in exactly those respects which when exaggerated produce the negro. They were darker, had thicker lips, lower foreheads, larger heads, more advancing jaws, a flatter foot, and a more attenuated frame. It is quite conceivable that the negro type was produced by a gradual degeneration from that which we find in Egypt. It is even conceivable that the Egyptian type was produced by gradual advance and amelioration from that of the negro.

Still, whencesoever derived, the Egyptian people, as it existed in the flourishing times of Egyptian history, was beyond all question a mixed race, showing diverse affinities. Whatever the people was originally, it received into it from time to time various foreign elements, and those in such quantities as seriously to affect its physique—Ethiopians from the south, Libyans from the west, Semites from the north-east, where Africa adjoined on Asia. There are two quite different types of Egyptian form and feature, blending together in the mass of the nation, but strongly developed, and (so to speak) accentuated in individuals. One is that which we see in portraits of Rameses III, and in some of Rameses II.—a moderately high forehead, a large, well-formed aquiline nose, a well-shaped mouth with lips not over full, and a delicately rounded chin. The other is comparatively coarse—forehead low, nose depressed and short, lower part of the face prognathous and sensual-looking, chin heavy, jaw large, lips thick and projecting. The two types of face are not, however, accompanied by much difference of frame. The Egyptian is always slight in figure, wanting in muscle, flat in foot, with limbs that are too long, too thin, too lady-like. Something more of muscularity appears, perhaps, in the earlier than in the later forms; but this is perhaps attributable to a modification of the artistic ideal.

As Egypt presents us with two types of physique, so it brings before us two strongly different types of character. On the one hand we see, alike in the pictured scenes, in the native literary remains, and in the accounts which foreigners have left us of the people, a grave and dignified race, full of serious and sober thought, given to speculation and reflection, occupied rather with the interests belonging to another world than with those that attach to this present scene of existence, and inclined to indulge in a gentle and dreamy melancholy. The first thought of a king, when he began his reign, was to begin his tomb. The desire of the grandee was similar. It is a trite tale how at feasts a slave carried round to all the guests the representation of a mummied corpse, and showed it to each in turn, with the solemn words—"Look at this, and so eat and drink; for be sure that one day such as this thou shalt be." The favourite song of the Egyptians, according to Herodotus, was a dirge. The "Lay of Harper," which we subjoin, sounds a key-note that was very familiar, at any rate, to large numbers among the Egyptians.



Ryc. 1 Great Pyramid of Saccarah (Present appearance).

Their light-hearted drollery sometimes found vent in caricature. The grand sculptures wherewith a king strove to perpetuate the memory of his warlike exploits were travestied by satirists, who reproduced the scenes upon papyrus as combats between cats and rats. The amorous follies of the monarch were held up to derision by sketches of a harem interior, where the kingly wooer was represented by a lion, and his favourites of the softer sex by gazelles. Even in serious scenes depicting the trial of souls in the next world, the sense of humour breaks out, where the bad man, transformed into a pig or a monkey, walks off with a comical air of surprise and discomfiture.

It does not, however, help us much towards the true knowledge of a people to scan their frames or study their facial angle, or even to contemplate the outer aspect of their daily life. We want to know their thoughts, their innermost feelings, their hopes, their fears—in a word, their belief. Nothing tells the character of a people so much as their religion; and we are only dealing superficially with the outward shows of things until we get down to the root of their being, the conviction, or convictions, held in the recesses of a people's heart. What, then, was the Egyptian religion? What did they worship? What did they reverence? What future did they look forward to?

Enter the huge courts of an Egyptian temple, or temple-palace, and you will see portrayed upon its lofty walls row upon row of deities. Here the king makes his offering to Ammon, Maut, Khons, Neith, Mentu, Shu, Seb, Nut, Osiris, Set, Horus; there he pours a libation to Phthah, Sekhet, Tum, Pasht, Anuka, Thoth, Anubis; elsewhere, it may be, he pays his court to Sati, Khem, Isis, Nephthys, Athor, Harmachis, Nausaas, and Nebhept. One monarch erects an altar to Satemi, Tum, Khepra, Shu, Tefnut, Seb, Netpe, Osiris, Isis, Set, Nephthys, Horus, and Thoth, mentioning on the same monument Phthah, Num, Sabak, Athor, Pasht, Mentu, Neith, Anubis, Nishem, and Kartak. Another represents himself on a similar object as offering adoration to Ammon, Khem, Phthah-Sokari, Seb, Nut, Thoth, Khons, Osiris, Isis, Horus, Athor, Uat (Buto), Neith, Sekhet, Anata, Nuneb, Nebhept, and Hapi. All these deities are represented by distinct forms, and have distinct attributes. Nor do they at all exhaust the Pantheon. One modern writer enumerates seventy-three divinities, and gives their several names and forms. Another has a list of sixty-three "*principal* deities," and notes that there were "others which personified the elements, or presided over the operations of nature, the seasons, and events." The Egyptians themselves speak not unfrequently of "the *thousand* gods," sometimes further qualifying them, as "the gods male, the gods female, those which belong to the land of Egypt." Practically, there were before the eyes of worshippers some scores, if not some hundreds, of deities, who invited their approach and challenged their affections.

CHAPTER 3 THE DAWN OF HISTORY.

All nations, unless they be colonies, have a prehistoric time—a dark period of mist and gloom, before the keen light of history dawns upon them. This period is the favourite playground of the myth-spirits, where they disport themselves freely, or lounge heavily and listlessly, according to their different natures. The Egyptian spirits were of the heavier and duller kind—not light and frolicsome, like the Greek and the Indo-Iranian. It has been said that Egypt never produced more than one myth, the Osirid legend; and this is so far true that in no other case is the story told at any considerable length, or with any considerable number of exciting incidents. There are, however, many short legends in the Egyptian remains, which have more or less of interest, and show that the people was not altogether devoid of imagination, though their imagination was far from lively. Seb, for instance, once upon a time, took the form of a goose, and laid the mundane egg, and hatched it. Thoth once wrote a wonderful book, full of wisdom and science, which told of everything concerning the fowls of the air, and the fishes of the sea, and the four-footed beasts of the earth. He who knew a single page of the book could charm the heaven, the earth, the great abyss, the mountains, and the seas. Thoth took the work and enclosed it in a box of gold, and the box of gold he placed within a box of silver, and the silver box within a box of ivory and ebony, and that again within a box of bronze; and the bronze box he enclosed within a box of brass, and the brass box within a box of iron; and the box, thus guarded, he threw into the Nile at Coptos. But a priest discovered the whereabouts of the book, and sold the knowledge to a young noble for a hundred pieces of silver, and the young noble with great trouble fished the book up. But the possession of the book brought him not good but evil. He lost his wife; he lost his child; he became entangled in a disgraceful intrigue. He was glad to part with the book. But the next possessor was not more fortunate; the book brought him no luck. The quest after unlawful knowledge involved all who sought it in calamity.

Another myth had for its subject the proposed destruction of mankind by Ra, the Sun-god. Ra had succeeded Phthah as king of Egypt, and had reigned for a long term of years in peace, contented with his subjects and they with him. But a time came when they grew headstrong and unruly; they uttered words against Ra; they plotted evil things; they grievously offended him. So Ra called the council of the gods together and asked them to advise him what he should do. They said mankind must be destroyed, and committed the task of destruction to Athor and Sekhet, who proceeded to smite the men over the whole land. But now fear came upon mankind; and the men of Elephantine made haste, and extracted the juice from the best of their fruits, and mingled it with human blood, and filled seven thousand jars, and brought them as an offering to the offended god. Ra drank and was content, and ordered the liquor that remained in the jars to be poured out; and, lo! it was an inundation which covered the whole land of Egypt; and when Athor went forth the next day to destroy, she saw no men in the fields, but only water, which she drank, and it pleased her, and she went away satisfied.

It would require another Euhemerus to find any groundwork of history in these narratives. We must turn away from the "shadow-land" which the Egyptians called the time of the gods on earth, if we would find trace of the real doings of men in the Nile valley, and put before our readers actual human beings in the place of airy phantoms. The Egyptians themselves taught that the first man of whom they had any record was a king called M'na, a name which the Greeks represented by Mên or Menes. M'na was born at Tena (This or Thinis) in Upper Egypt, where his ancestors had borne sway before him. He was the first to master the Lower country, and thus to unite under a single sceptre the "two Egypts"—the long narrow Nile valley and the broad Delta plain. Having placed on his head the double crown which thenceforth symbolized dominion over both tracts, his first thought was that a new capital was needed. Egypt could not, he felt, be ruled conveniently from the latitude of Thebes, or from any site in the Upper country; it required a capital which should abut on both regions, and so command both. Nature pointed out one only fit locality, the junction of the plain with the vale—"the balance of the two regions," as the Egyptians called it; the place where the narrow "Upper Country" terminates, and Egypt opens out into the wide smiling plain that thence spreads itself on every side to the sea. Hence there would be easy access to both regions; both would be, in a way, commanded; here, too, was a readily defensible position, one assailable only in front. Experience has shown that the instinct of the first founder was right, or that his political and strategic foresight was extraordinary. Though circumstances, once and again, transferred the seat of government to Thebes or Alexandria, yet such removals were short-lived. The force of geographic fact was too strong to be permanently overcome, and after a few centuries power gravitated back to the centre pointed out by nature.

If we may believe the tradition, there was, when the idea of building the new capital arose, a difficulty in obtaining a site in all respects advantageous. The Nile, before debouching upon the plain, hugged for many miles the base of the Libyan hills, and was thus on the wrong side of the valley. It was wanted on the other side, in order to be a water-bulwark against an Asiatic invader. The founder, therefore, before building his city, undertook a gigantic work. He raised a great embankment across the natural course of the river; and, forcing it from its bed, made it enter a new channel and run midway down the valley, or, if anything, rather towards its eastern side. He thus obtained the bulwark against invasion that he required, and he had an ample site for his capital between the new channel of the stream and the foot of the western hills.

It is undoubtedly strange to hear of such a work being constructed at the very dawn of history, by a population that was just becoming a people. But in Egypt precocity is the rule—a Minerva starts full-grown from the head of Jove. The pyramids themselves cannot be placed very long after the supposed reign of Menes; and the engineering skill implied in the pyramids is simply of a piece with that attributed to the founder of Memphis.

In ancient times a city was nothing without a temple; and the capital city of the most religious people in the world could not by any possibility lack that centre of civic life which its chief temple always was to every ancient town. Philosophy must settle the question how it came to pass that religious ideas were in ancient times so universally prevalent and so strongly pronounced. History is only bound to note the fact. Coeval, then, with the foundation of the city of Menes was, according to the tradition, the erection of a great temple to Phthah—"the Revealer," the Divine artificer, by whom the world and man were created, and the hidden thought of the remote Supreme Being was made manifest to His creatures, Phthah's temple lay within the town, and was originally a *naos* or "cell," a single building probably not unlike that between the Sphinx's paws at Ghizeh, situated within a *temenos*, or "sacred enclosure," watered from the river, and no doubt planted with trees. Like the medieval cathedrals, the building grew with the lapse of centuries, great kings continually adding new structures to the main edifice, and enriching it with statuary and painting. Herodotus saw it in its full glory, and calls it "a vast edifice, very worthy of commemoration." Abd-el-Latif saw it in its decline, and notes the beauty of its remains: "the great monolithic shrine of breccia verde, nine cubits high, eight long, and seven broad, the doors which swung on hinges of stone, the well-carven statues, and the lions terrific in their aspect."[[7]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15663/15663-h/15663-h.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22Footnote_7_7) At the present day scarcely a trace remains. One broken colossus of the Great Ramesses, till very recently prostrate, and a few nondescript fragments, alone continue on the spot, to attest to moderns the position of that antique fane, which the Egyptians themselves regarded as the oldest in their land.

The new city received from its founder the name of Men-nefer—"the Good Abode." It was also known as Ei-Ptah—"the House of Phthah." From the former name came the prevailing appellations—the "Memphis" of the Greeks and Romans, the "Moph" of the Hebrews, the "Mimpi" of the Assyrians, and the name still given to the ruins, "Tel-Monf." It was indeed a "good abode"—watered by an unfailing stream, navigable from the sea, which at once brought it supplies and afforded it a strong protection, surrounded on three sides by the richest and most productive alluvium, close to quarries of excellent stone, warm in winter, fanned by the cool northern breezes in the summer-time, within easy reach of the sea, yet not so near as to attract the cupidity of pirates. Few capitals have been more favourably placed. It was inevitable that when the old town went to ruins, a new one should spring up in its stead. Memphis still exists, in a certain sense, in the glories of the modern Cairo, which occupies an adjacent site, and is composed largely of the same materials.