



Ancient Agrarian Societies: Nubia and Ancient Egypt

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

The Nile River Valley is home to one of the most ancient societies. Best known for pyramids and mummies, communities in this area, such as Egypt and Nubia, were founded long before the first pyramid.

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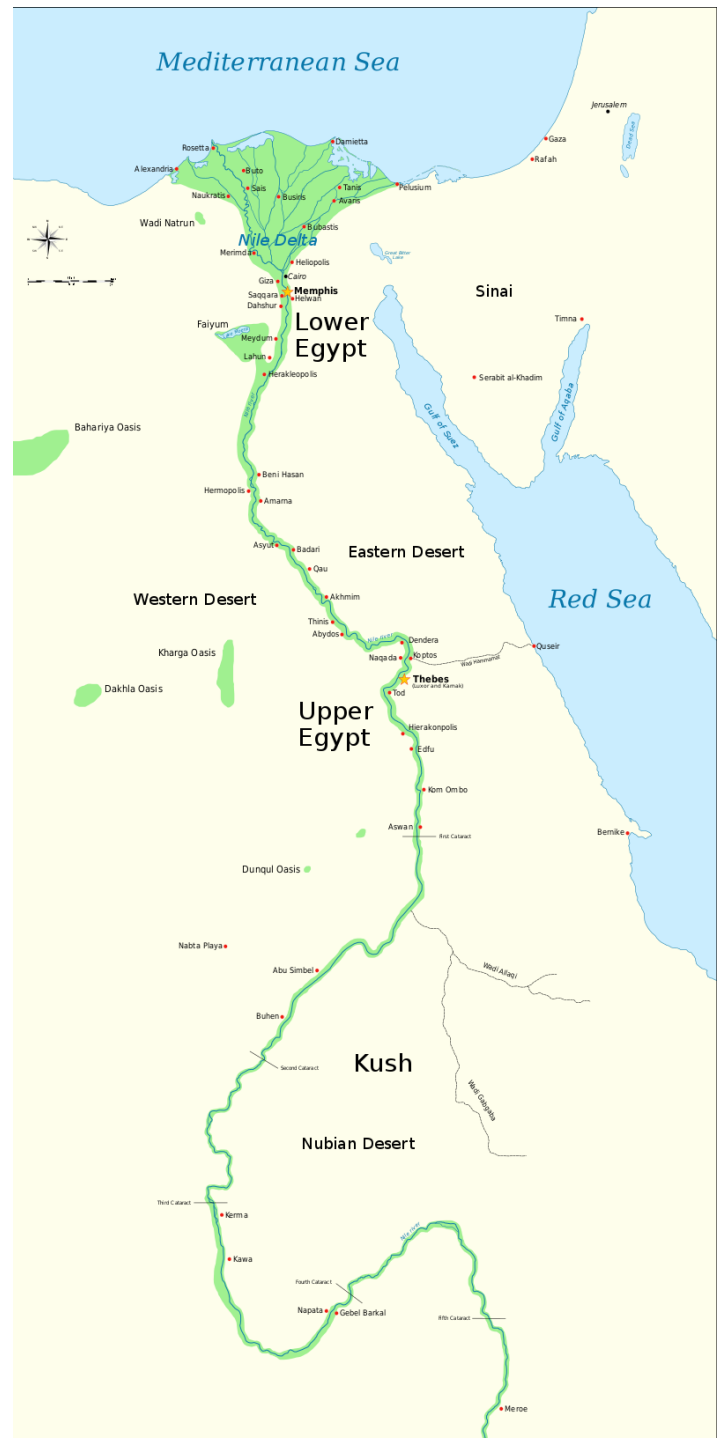
Introduction

Most early agrarian (farming) societies developed along river valleys. These valleys provided access to fresh water for humans and animals. They also possessed fertile soil for planting and a water source for both the irrigation of crops and for trade. Early humans had lived in Africa for hundreds of thousands of years as foragers. So why would humans begin to shift from foraging to farming? One reason, especially in this section of Africa, was the impact of naturally occurring climate change. As this area became dryer, fewer resources were available. The regions with the most resources at this time were found along river valleys. The Nile River is the longest river in the world, and this stretch of land provided the necessities required to sustain life.

Foraging and pastoral communities lived in this area for centuries before people began planting grains. In fact, the shift from foraging to farming was probably a slow process here. Some communities settled closer to the river and farmed more than those on the outskirts of the river valley. People who stayed in rural areas probably practiced a mix of small-plot farming, foraging, herding, and hunting. Interactions between these communities were common. They also likely shared certain cultural practices such as similar beliefs and languages.

Nubia, A-Group culture (c. 3800-2900 BCE)

The ancient settlements of Nubia were located in an area south of Upper Egypt in modern-day Sudan. They stretched from the first cataract to the second cataract (shallow areas of the Nile). Some of the earliest farming societies in the Indo-Mediterranean world began in this region of Africa. Archaeologists have called the early inhabitants of Nubia, A-Group culture. Almost 200 sites, mainly cemeteries and some housing sites, have been analyzed. Nubian and early Egyptian artifacts appeared to have many similarities. This indicates that the two societies may have shared many traits like ideas about rulers, written symbols, and artistic features. There is also evidence of established trade networks between Nubia and Egypt. Nubia was located in an area that participated in the flow of goods like ivory from inner Africa to the Mediterranean region.



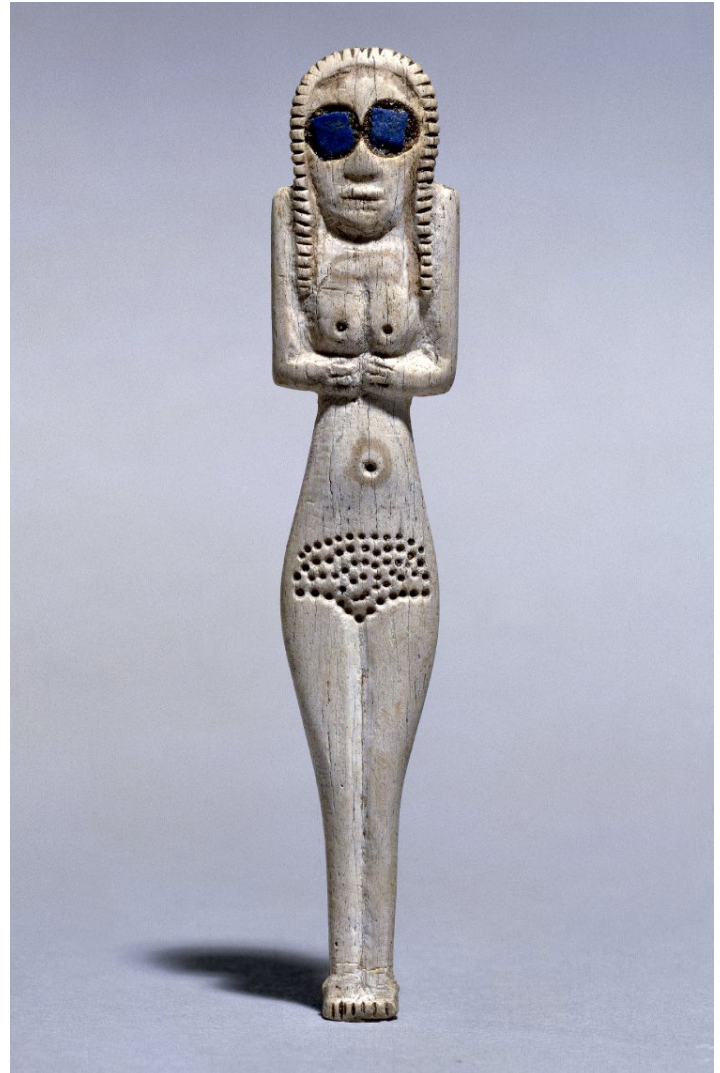
Map of Ancient Egypt, featuring the Nile River up to the fifth cataract, along with ancient cities and sites from the period c. 3150 to 30 BCE, by Jeff Dahl, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Nubians lived in stone houses. Archaeologists have found evidence of Nubian storage pits, flint deposits, stone tools, grindstones, gold, copper, and pottery. Some of these artifacts came from local sources while others came from Egypt and beyond. Nubians also buried their dead in a similar fashion to the Egyptians. Both societies buried bodies facing west and left offerings to guide the dead to the afterlife. Lapis lazuli, a semi-precious, deep blue stone, has also been found. This rock was used in the creation of the female figure shown on the right. These figures may have been used as fertility symbols or for religious purposes. (Very much like the Venus of Willendorf discussed in Era 2). It is interesting that the nearest quarry (mine) for this rock was in modern-day Afghanistan. These mines are thousands of miles from the Nile River Valley where these artifacts were found. Using this foreign stone in the Nubian-Egyptian region would indicate that the figurine was a special item. These figurines would only have been buried with someone of high social standing.

Some graves of people with higher social status also included the bodies of cattle. This shows the importance of this animal to a semi-agricultural and pastoral community. These graves also held pottery, beads, gold, ivory, incense burners, sculptures and seals. Maceheads, ornaments placed on maces or staffs, have also been found. These maceheads would have been used by those in powerful positions. These grave items also indicate that the cultures of Nubia and Egypt were connected. Some of the decorations on these artifacts have common themes.

Nubian women may have been more highly regarded than women in other early agrarian societies.

Archaeologists have uncovered female burials with important grave goods, which provide some insight into the importance of women. Women were viewed as givers of life, and in many cases, experts in agriculture. Nubian women also held an important role in religious rituals. Their role was especially important in rituals related to birth (creation), fertility, death and rebirth. Both Nubian and Ancient Egyptian religion viewed the goddess Isis in a similar way.



Bone figure of a woman, c. 3700-3500 BCE. By British Museum, public domain.

Ancient Egypt—Predynastic, Protodynastic, and Early Dynastic Periods (c. 6000-2700 BCE)

We usually think of pyramids and mummies when we think of Ancient Egyptian culture. The pyramids are huge structures that housed the dead and have been preserved for millennia. But Egyptian history began long before the pyramids were built. It began long before the reign of King Tut and Cleopatra, and even the mummification process.

The Ancient Egypt of mummies and pyramids is usually divided into periods ruled by different dynasties—lines of rulers in the same family—who ruled as pharaohs. These dynasties really began to rule Egypt around 3000 BCE. In this article, we are mainly focusing on:

- the period *before* dynasties of kings ruling a unified Egypt—called the Predynastic Period (about 6000-3200 BCE)
- the period in which a centralized kingdom began to emerge—called the Protodynastic Period (around 3200-3000 BCE)
- the earliest pharaohs—known as the Early Dynastic Period (3000-2700 BCE)

The early history of Egypt covers the transition to agriculture and the foundation of societies governed by kings. There are still things we do not know about this ancient history. After more than a century of excavations (digs to search for ancient artifacts) in Egypt, we might expect to have more detail. But many of these early sites lie under the current water level and have proven difficult areas in which to dig. We do know that early agrarian communities existed along the Nile River Valley. These communities were located north of the first cataract (Upper Egypt) and the Nile Delta (Lower Egypt). Like many other areas, the shift from foraging to farming was a gradual one. In Egypt, it appears that the domestication of animals came before the founding of complex farming societies. Some evidence also suggests that certain crops grown in Egypt were first farmed around the Fertile Crescent (Mesopotamia). This process took about 2000-2500 years and may have been helped by climate change. As a result, a drying period occurred, which pushed people closer to the resources of the Nile.

Similar to Nubia, Egypt appears to have been connected to other areas of Southwest Asia. We know this from artifacts found in burial sites from these foreign areas. Lower Egypt had fertile soil and access to networks of trade and interaction with the Mediterranean and Southwest Asian. As a result, this section of Egypt grew in the number of settlements, population, and power.

Throughout the predynastic period, rulers of different communities began to amass more and more power, and contact between communities grew. However, some rural communities were relatively self-sufficient. They had contact with others on a more local scale than those who lived near the main centers of society along the Nile. As connections between these cultures grew along the Nile, shared beliefs and places for rituals became more common. An example of these shared spiritual places was the city of Abydos. This city housed the dead (necropolis) of Nubia and Naqada. Later Abydos was also chosen as the burial place for Egyptian royalty.

Some time around 3200 BCE, a ruler managed to take control of the entirety of Upper Egypt, in the south. He was known as Scorpion I, the first of two Scorpion kings of Upper Egypt. These kings preceded King Narmer, who is thought to be the monarch who unified Lower and Upper Egypt under one ruler. According to later historical sources (c. 1900 BCE), Menes was said to have been the king who united Egypt. However, after archaeologists discovered the Narmer Palette, a stone carving, historians began to revise this timeline. This palette depicts the year and name of King Narmer and shows this king conquering both lands to unite them as one. Some archaeologists have proposed that Narmer and Menes might have been the same person. Others have speculated that Menes was a later king also known as Hor-Aha. Regardless, the unification of Egypt marks a significant point in Egyptian history. This is when kings began consolidating power and the region grew into an ancient superpower. It also begins the Early Dynastic Period in Egyptian history.

The unification of Egypt is also when hieroglyphic writing became more common. First used to keep records, this script became the written language of Egypt. Hieratic script was used for recordkeeping and hieroglyphics were reserved for religious purposes. There are also a number of similarities between the ancient scripts of Egypt and Nubia. This may indicate that they shared a common language, although there may have been regional dialects.



Narmer Palette c. 3000 BCE, by Nicolas Perrault III. Public domain.

Unification of Egypt

The early kings of Egypt maintained a dual role as both god and king. In much the same way, Egyptian society was seen as a society of opposing forces. Egyptians incorporated this concept of duality in all aspects of their lives. This included the land, the rulers, the notion of life and afterlife, and the complimentary nature of men and women. This idea of harmony between male and female helped elevate Egyptian women to a status unknown in other ancient agrarian societies. As in Nubia, women held important roles in religious rituals and agricultural production. Egyptian women also received equal pay for equal work and owned their own businesses and land. This was not true in most areas of the world at this time. In fact, most industrialized areas of the world today still have not achieved equal pay for equal work.

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Cover: Copy of wall painting from private tomb 40 of Huy, Thebes (I,1, 75-78), Nubians with tribute, 20th century. Framed. © Photo by Ashmolean Museum / Heritage Images / Getty Images

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