CHAPTER ONE
The Land and People

As the jumbo jet descends from cloud cover, the attendant announces that the plane is on its final descent into Cairo International Airport. As usual, the cabin is full, not a seat to spare. The occupants include Egyptians returning from work and play overseas, businesspersons, and a large number of tourists. Whether the passengers are longtime residents or first-time visitors, those with window seats scan the ground to see what they can of the fabled city and its marvelous antiquities. At first only sand dunes are visible. The flight is in luck. Wind currents require the plane to pass over the great pyramids of Giza. When these monuments appear, cheers, gasps of delight, and murmurs break out all over the cabin. Those among the passengers who have been to Egypt know that this view does not compare with seeing the structures for the first time from ground level. Yet, even at 3,000 feet, their monumentality is awe-inspiring. Even to the inveterate Cairene passengers the puzzle of how individuals more than 5,000 years ago constructed such magnificent burial sites arises. Thoughts of ancient Egypt are in everyone's mind.

In the drive in to the center of the city from the airport, motorists pass along the boulevard where the Egyptian military holds its ceremonial parades. At one location they observe the impressive grave site of President Anwar al-Sadat. Even the untutored visitors cannot help but be reminded of the Giza pyramids. They served as burial chambers for three of Egypt's early and mighty pharaohs. If the travelers know their history of Egypt, they are aware that the city of Cairo is dotted with many such memorials to the greats. Almost from the beginnings of human habitation in the Nile River basin

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Egyptians have memorialized their most powerful and respected rulers, using grandiose monuments to extol their services to the people and to the land. The bigger and more impressive the sites, or so the theory goes, the more splendid the reigns were.

The Sadat tomb has even deeper connections with Egypt's past. Across from the burial grounds are military grandstands in the middle of which is a single seat, painted in black. It is the chair that Anwar al-Sadat occupied when he was gunned down during the October 1981 military parade, held to celebrate the triumphs of the October 1973 war with Israel. If one also remembers the words that the assassin, Khaled al-Islambouli, announced at his trial, "I have killed pharaoh," the Egyptian past seems ever present. Egypt's last three rulers (Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat, and Husni Mubarak) have frequently been compared with pharaohs or other of Egypt's earlier rulers. Sadat in particular tried to associate himself and his actions with Egypt's pharaonic past, carrying his baton upright in his hand like a pharaoh carrying the key of life and dressing in regal splendor on high ceremonial occasions. One contemporary observer calls the new rulers Egypt's neo-Mamluks.

Many observers stress the continuity, even the unchanging nature, of Egypt over the millennia. They argue that climate, geography, and the unvarying routines of the Nile River, cresting in summer into floods, impose a unity that human ingenuity cannot alter. Geographically Egypt is cut off from the east and west by deserts, in the north by the Mediterranean, and in the south by fierce Nile rapids, called cataracts. Its inhabitants therefore are crammed into a small band of arable land that the Nile makes available to them, a dependence that the most brilliant scientists have been able to change only a little.

Yet change has also been a prominent feature of Egypt's long history. The period breaks are palpable. Ancient Egyptian culture, lasting nearly three millennia, ultimately gave way to Greek and Roman conquests. The ancient language of the Egyptians fell out of use, and many of the great monuments of antiquity were either covered by sand or torn down so that their materials could be used elsewhere. Then the polytheistic culture of the Greeks and Romans

gave way to Christianity, followed by Islam, which brought a new world religion and a new language. Nor was Islam a single entity, for one set of Muslim conquerors succeeded another. The Fatimids, a shimmering Shiite dynasty, gave way to Ayyubids, then to Mamluks, and finally to Ottomans. Next came a new set of foreign conquerors: first the French, followed, after a stunning interlude of Turko-Circassian rulers, by the British. Although contemporaries compare Egypt's present-day regime with the pharaohs and the Mamluks, the men who have ruled Egypt since the 1950s boast of their Egyptianness and assert that they are the first native-born sons to rule the country since the pharaohs.

Change and continuity are, thus, hallmarks of Egypt's long history. These themes are critical to the history of Egypt. Few countries have had as much written about their pasts as has Egypt; yet only a few books offer overviews. The demand is ever pressing. Tourists clamor for a general guide to the rich history of the country—one that will allow them to set the country's omnipresent historical monuments in an understandable narrative. Scholars and experts are eager for a work that will encapsulate the history of periods that are not their specialties. Alas, little exists. Guidebooks abound, but they specialize in certain periods and particular regions. Most are short on history. The reasons for this gap are not hard to discern. In many ways Egypt has too rich a history, too many distinctive historical periods. Each has its linguistic, ethnographic, and documentary requirements, and each has a voluminous, highly specialized, and sophisticated historical literature. Egyptologists find it difficult to converse with modernists. Graeco-Roman scholars have much in common with Islamists since both sets of scholars write about the same geographical entity and the same ethno-linguistic community; yet their linguistic and historical training often keeps them apart.

How much has Egypt changed over the centuries and how much has it remained the same? For millennia the rhythms of everyday existence revolved around the Nile. And they continue to do so even today though the country has not experienced annual Nile floods for more than half a century. Does the presence of the Nile and the relatively narrow band of arable land surrounding the Nile give

a unity to the history of Egypt that transcends its many historical periods?

Because of Egypt's unquestioned geographical and strategic importance, lying at the corner of three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), the land has attracted numerous outsiders, often as invaders. Hyksos, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mamluks, Ottomans, French, and British (some would now even add Americans) have ruled over the country, importing their languages, their populations, and their ways of life. But how effectively have they imposed their cultures on the men and women who lived alongside the banks of the Nile? Certainly much has changed over the course of a long and diverse history. Hieroglyphs passed out of existence, not to be deciphered until the nineteenth century through the work of modern linguistic scholars. Much of the pharaonic culture that so intrigues Egypt's contemporary visitors was buried under centuries of sand deposits. It too only came into prominence through the efforts of a hardy band of scholars known as Egyptologists. Egypt was once the most Christian territory in all of Christendom. But following the Arab-Muslim invasion of the seventh century Christianity gave way to Islam, though not totally. The Coptic population today constitutes nearly 10 percent of Egypt's total, and the Coptic language, with connections to ancient Egyptian, continues in use today, though confined to a clerical class.

Change is obvious. But so is continuity. Monumental architecture, prevalent in pharaonic times, can still be seen in the monuments dedicated to Egypt's modern leaders. So, too, some would argue, does the cult of an all-powerful ruler, whose task it was in ancient times to ensure order and prosperity and whose responsibilities, under Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, remain much the same. Religion was at the core of the culture of the ancients. Much in early Egyptian religious belief and practice passed, though in a radically modified form, into Christianity and Islam. In a world that seemed ready to sideline religion Islam has refused to give way. Egypt has played a central role in the emergence of a resurgent Islam. Change and continuity, these are the themes of Egypt's historical narrative. They are writ large.

Peoples and countries often owe their names to foreigners. Spaniards, the first Europeans to arrive in the Americas, believed that they had landed somewhere in East Asia. They called the Native Americans Indians. So it was with Egypt and Egyptians. The ancient Egyptians referred to their territory as *kemet*, the black or arable land, thus distinguishing the cultivable portion of their area from the desert, which they called *deshret*, or the red soil. It was the Greeks who coined the word *aigyptos* (Egyptian) to represent the name of the inhabitants of the Nile River basin as well as the territory in which they lived. This Greek word had an ancient Egyptian derivation. It was a Greek corruption of the ancient Egyptian name for the pharaonic capital city, Memphis: *Hi-kiptah* (the castle of the god Ptah), thus establishing a tradition of using the name of the capital city to stand for the entire territory and the people. Later, the Arab conquerors of Egypt called their new capital, located near the old pharaonic capital of Memphis, *Misr*, which they also employed as the term for the entire territory and whose inhabitants were called *Misriyyin*, the inhabitants of *Misr*.

THE NILE RIVER AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO EGYPT

The Greeks were fascinated with Egypt, a fascination that impelled Alexander's conquest of the country and must account for his many, largely successful efforts to embrace Egyptian ways. To the Greeks, especially to that most accomplished of Greek historians and travelers, Herodotus, Egypt was paired in their imagination with Scythia. The Egyptians represented the most ancient and sophisticated of peoples in contrast to the nomadic, less sophisticated Scythians. To Herodotus we owe many truisms about ancient Egypt, not the least of which was that the land was the gift of the Nile. The Egyptian descriptions that he offered in his book *The Persian Wars* owed much to conversations he held with Egyptian priests in Memphis, Heliopolis, and Thebes during his fifth-century BCE travels in the country. The clerics assured him that their land was "the most ancient of mankind." Certainly, Herodotus's admiration for the people and the land was unbounded. He described Egypt as a territory

that "possesses so many wonders; nor has any [other country] such a number of works which defy description. Not only is the climate different from that of the rest of the world, and the river unlike any other rivers, but the people also, in most of their manners and customs, exactly reverse the practice of mankind." He noted that women went to markets while men stayed at home to weave cloth. Only men were priests; yet instead of growing hair, which was the practice in Herodotus's homeland, they shaved off their hair. Even more perplexing to him was the fact that Egyptians ate out of doors and urinated indoors.

Herodotus's precise words about the Nile are worth repeating: "The Egypt to which the Greeks go in their ships is an acquired country, the gift of the Nile." Yet his acute perception of the Nile's centrality to the people of Egypt was only partially right. Certainly, without the Nile's life-giving waters, the vast territory of Egypt (37,540 square kilometers today) would have been little more than desert, interrupted here and there by life-supporting oases. Its 7,500,000 acres of arable land, which today support three growing seasons a year and constitute one of the world's richest and most productive agricultural land areas, would have lain barren.

Herodotus took the Nile and its generous annual floods for granted. In reality, the Nile had not always been so beneficent. Although a great river existed for many millions of years, it was only 12,500 years ago that today's Nile took shape. Earlier Niles, of which there were many, either brought too much water or too little. They could not have produced the way of life that Egyptians take for granted. They would never have created the splendid cultures that marked Egypt's long and resplendent history.

The Nile is the longest river in the world, slightly outdistancing the Amazon. It is fed by innumerable streams and rivers, but its most remote source rises in the hills of Rwanda, some 4,238 miles south of its ultimate destination, the Mediterranean Sea. Its tributaries and main branches flow through eight countries—Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, and Egypt—encompassing more than one million square miles, no less than one-tenth of the whole of the African continent. Yet, for a river that

traverses such an immense area, it delivers only a tiny quantity of water. Compared with the mighty Amazon River in South America it transports a mere trickle of water, carrying only 2 percent of the totals that the Amazon supplies. Its volume is no more than that of Germany's Rhine, rarely thought of as one of the large rivers of the world.

Although the Nile has innumerable tributaries, especially in its distant locations in central and equatorial Africa, three branches do most of its work. First, the Atbara River, descending out of the highlands of Ethiopia, carries one-seventh of the river's total annual volume. A raging torrent during the flood season, when monsoon rains and melting snows in the Ethiopian highlands fill its channel, it becomes a dry bed during the nonflood season. The Blue Nile, also rising in the highlands of Ethiopia, was the critical source of Egypt's agricultural prosperity until the twentieth century, bringing vast quantities of silt-laden waters from the Ethiopian highlands during the flood season and depositing this rich soil in the Nile valley basin. It carries four-sevenths of the river's total capacity, much of it during the flood season. Finally comes the White Nile, crashing down out of Lake Victoria and meandering its way northward through the marshlands of the southern Sudan, known as the *sudd*, to merge with the Blue Nile at Khartoum. It carries the remaining two-sevenths of the Nile waters. It, too, is critical to Egypt's annual flood, for it provides a steady source of water year round, thereby moderating the main Nile River and keeping the floodwaters from being violent and unpredictable, as they so often are in the other major rivers of the world. From Khartoum to the Mediterranean Sea the Nile flows on a further 1,600 miles, with the aid of only a single tributary, the Atbara, and without significant rainfall. Yet it leaves enough water and rich soil to create "an elongated oasis" stretching all the way from Aswan to the Mediterranean Sea. It was in this elongated oasis that the Egyptians created their pioneering ancient culture.

The surface of the earth undergoes radical, tectonic changes from time to time. These changes produce new land masses, create mountains and valleys, alter climates and habitats, and change the

course of rivers. One such change occurred in central Africa approximately six million years ago. The earth's crust rose to form the Rift Valley, causing dramatic changes in climate, geography, human habitation, and river direction. Previously the waters of central and equatorial Africa had drained toward the Red Sea and the Congo basin. An uplifted Rift not only created the highlands of present-day East Africa where the first hominids appeared and the great lakes of equatorial Africa—Tanganyika, Albert, Edward, and eventually the largest of them all, Victoria—it also redirected river systems and drainage patterns northward toward Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea. Still, the present-day Nile had yet to appear. Several pre-Niles scoured out channels for themselves within Egypt as they progressed to the Mediterranean, though they were hardly the usable river of the modern era. Sometimes these early Niles were fed by waters from equatorial Africa; other times, during periods of great aridity, the central African connection was broken. Occasionally the Nile dried up altogether, leaving Egypt a desert, devoid of all life. Around 800,000 to 700,000 years ago, during an African wet phase, the waters from Ethiopia again broke through to Egypt and turned the Nile into a mighty, though highly unpredictable river. Then 12,500 years ago, during another wet phase, the waters of Lake Victoria, fed by the other lakes of equatorial Africa, spilled out of its basin and plunged northward to form the White Nile, which joined the Blue Nile at Khartoum to become the main Nile River on which Egypt's livelihood soon depended.

Mighty rivers are dangerous forces of nature. Their floods are often unpredictable. People who reside within their floodplains put themselves at risk. Large-scale floods can ruin crops and destroy villages. Insufficient floods produce inadequate harvests and lead to starvation. Yet, what we often refer to today as civilization had its birth in these river basins—the locations of the earliest, complex societies. Naturally, these areas are the subject of intense archaeological inquiry since they offer insights to historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and other experts on how human beings became prolific, prosperous, and the dominant species on the planet. The peoples residing in three of these floodplains—the Tigris-Euphrates,

the Indus, and the Nile—led the way in creating the world's first urban-based, hierarchical, and complex societies. The breakthroughs to complex, large-scale cultures occurred roughly between 7,000 and 5,000 years ago. We know little about the Harappan culture of the Indus River basin; its early remains were regularly covered up by annual floods and new settlements. Mesopotamia and Egypt are better known, and though the similarities in the histories of these two centers of advanced culture, often referred to as the cradles of civilizations, are notable, their contrasts are even more striking. Many of the differences, not surprisingly, sprang from the rivers that the local populations learned to master.

The modern Nile is a remarkably kind and productive river, especially when compared with the Tigris and Euphrates. Its floods are highly predictable. They arrive at the most opportune time for the growing season and require little hydraulic engineering. The Nile's annual flood crested toward the end of the summer months and left its silted waters on the soil at the very moment that Egyptian farmers were ready to plant their crops. All that was required, once the waters had drained back into the main Nile channel, was for the peasants to broadcast their seeds and livestock to trample the seed under foot.

Compare this with the challenges that faced Mesopotamian cultivators. They were confronted with altogether more formidable problems that required elaborate arrangements for controlling raging floodwaters. Because the Tigris-Euphrates annual floods came at the apex of the growing season, agriculturalists had to create an irrigation system that would protect the crops under cultivation and also provide water when the floodwaters had receded. First, the riverbanks needed to be heightened to ensure that water did not spill onto the fields and destroy crops. In addition, Mesopotamian agriculturalists fashioned a sophisticated set of irrigation canals to siphon off the waters of the Euphrates when they were at their low point but were most needed on the land. Moreover, the waters did not flow back easily into the main river channel, as the Nile did, with the result that the low-lying lands in the Mesopotamian delta were at risk of salting up and becoming unusable.

Herodotus himself noted how benign the Nile waters were. No doubt he exaggerated when he observed that "at present, it must be confessed, they [the inhabitants of the Egyptian delta] obtain the fruits of the field with less trouble than any people in the world, the rest of Egypt included, since they have no need to break up the ground with the plough, nor to use the hoe, nor to do any of the work which the rest of mankind find necessary if they are to get a crop. But the husbandman waits till the river has of its own accord spread itself over the fields and withdrawn again to its bed, and then sows his plot of ground, and after sowing, turns his swine into it after which he has only to await the harvest."

The Egyptians, too, were fulsome in their praise of their mighty and life-giving river. In words carved on a pyramid some forty-five centuries ago, an Egyptian poet exclaimed:

> They tremble that behold the Nile in full flood.
> The fields laugh and the river banks are overflowed.
> The visage of men is bright, and the hearts of the gods rejoiceth.

And some centuries later another poet also sang the river's praises:

> Praise to thee O Nile, that issuest forth from the earth and comes
> to nourish the dwellers in Egypt.
> That givest drink to the desert places which were far from water;
> his dew it is that falleth from heaven.

The Nile produced another immeasurable benefit, leading ultimately to the unity of the land from the Mediterranean Sea to the first cataract or rapids at present-day Aswan. Not only did its currents flow northward, but its winds blew in the opposite direction. Sailors could set their sails to capture the Mediterranean breezes as they traveled south; they could coast under the currents of the river as they traveled north. Yet unity did not come easily or quickly. It came about through hard-won struggles, still only dimly understood.

The Nile divides Egypt into two parts. The southern half of Egypt, called Upper Egypt because it contains the upper waters of the Nile

inside Egypt, has a narrow floodplain, surrounded on both sides by hills and mountains. Its cultivable lands stretch out over a long north-south dimension, but never exceed ten miles east and west of the river's banks. At a location where Cairo now sits and where the political center of Egypt was often found, the Nile branches out. Today there are two branches, one debouching at Damietta, the other at Rosetta. In pharaonic times, there were many more branches leading to the Mediterranean. Northward of Cairo in what is termed Lower Egypt exists a large delta area, stretching at its widest nearly two hundred miles from east to west. For millennia, Lower Egypt has been the country's breadbasket. Often it supplied much of the eastern Mediterranean with vital foodstuffs.

Today's Nile, tamed by vast hydraulic works, is a languorous and calm river. To the naked eye it hardly seems to have a current. The only cataract within Egypt itself, at Aswan, no longer produces the vast churning, hissing, and spitting of waters that occurred during the high Nile state when floodwaters crashed against massive rock formations in the main channel. In the days before the high dam south of Aswan had cut the supply of water to the first cataract, visitors flocked to Aswan during the flood season to witness this force of nature. Foreign businesspersons eventually built the Old Cataract Hotel on the very site of the cataract to ensure that vacationers and tourists could see this marvel of nature. Even today, when river turbulence no longer exists, the hotel, with its turn-of-the-twentieth-century charm and amenities, remains one of the favorite spas for those seeking repose from a troubled and turbulent world.

Speaking of repose, if one wants to find serenity in the hustle and bustle of Cairo, take a felucca ride on the Nile. Even at Cairo the Nile waters are far from impressive. The distance from one bank to the other is not great, a far cry from, say, the Mississippi River. Nor do the muddy waters beckon one to go for a swim. Feluccas look worn and in need of repair. Nearly all of them have patches on their sails. But expert boatmen navigate them, and as one meanders from the east to the west banks of the Nile, one feels the pull of history. Here are reeds like those where the baby Moses was said to have been hidden from the wrath of the pharaohs. Overhead is the bridge

to Cairo University, where protesters often gathered to shout their defiance against the British or officials of the Egyptian government. And as twilight descends on the city (and it does so with alarming speed), Cairo's lights shimmer off the river, projecting an image of graceful splendor.

The Beginnings of Human Habitation in the Nile Valley

The earliest records of human habitation in the Nile valley date from 400,000 years ago. They consist of flaked stone tools that suggest that *Homo erectus* dwelled in this area as these early hominids, predecessors of modern men and women, moved through the African continent before populating other parts of the Afro-Eurasian landmass. Unfortunately, no bones have been found, so our evidence rests entirely on the discovery of tools. Just when modern men and women—*Homo sapiens*—entered the Nile basin has yet to be determined. The earliest settlements known so far date from 7,000 years ago. They were found at Merimde, on the edge of the Western delta, and in the Fayyum region southwest of present-day Cairo. Where these early humans came from is still an open question. Some scholars suggest that they arrived from the Libyan Desert during a drying-out phase when humans flocked into river basins for sustenance. Others argue for a northeast origin, believing that these people entered Egypt from Southwest Asia, migrating across the Sinai Peninsula.

In their new setting *Homo sapiens* adapted to the rhythms of the Nile without great difficulty. They divided the arable lands into irrigation basins of quite varying sizes, ranging from 1,000 acres to 40,000 acres, in preparation for the annual flood. Cultivators divided basins by means of simple earthen walls and then allowed the waters when they flooded into the basins to soak into the soil for a period lasting between forty and sixty days, depositing new layers of silt. Only then did farmers cut the barriers and permit the waters to flow on to basins further downriver or drain back into the main Nile channel. The view of the flooded plain at the height of the flood season was magnificent to behold. Harold Hurst, a British hydraulic

engineer and part of a last generation to see the Egyptian countryside when it was still fully flooded, commented: "In the bright sunlight and the temperate weather of the autumn in Egypt this was a wonderful sight with the desert hills and the pyramids in the background." All of Egypt's arable land lay under water save for the mounds on which the villages nestled. People moved from village to village by means of boats. (See plate 1 for an artist's rendition of the Nile in flood.)

The irrigation technology required to trap the annual Nile floods was simple. Each village, usually under the control of local notables, took responsibility for its own irrigation. This did lead to village rivalries and disputes, some of which became violent and produced bitter histories. What the central government was needed for, when it finally came into being sometime 5,000 years ago, was to store seed grain for the next year and provide emergency supplies of foodstuffs if the floods were inadequate. The state also maintained Nilometers, which were placed strategically along the upper reaches of the river to provide advanced indications of when the floods would come and how large they would be. A true canal system did not come into being until the nineteenth century, when Egypt's rulers, Muhammad Ali first of all during the first half of that century and the British after their occupation of the country in 1882, constructed a series of barrages and dams across the Nile that replaced the basin system of irrigation, largely unchanged since pharaonic times, with a system of perennial irrigation. Whereas in ancient times basin irrigation had permitted only a single growing season, perennial irrigation, which made Nile waters available the year round, enabled Egyptian cultivators to take full advantage of the fertility of the soil and the climate to grow two, sometimes three crops per year. What the modern cultivators sacrificed, however, was the regular deposit of new soil carried in the floodwaters from the Ethiopian highlands. As a result cultivators turned to larger and larger quantities of fertilizers as the only way to maintain the fertility and high productivity of the land.

The ancient Egyptians were among those first groups of peoples who moved from being hunters and gatherers to engage in settled

agriculture and husbandry. They were not the first, however. They learned many of the techniques for planting seeds and harvesting crops either from the peoples of Southwest Asia, usually regarded as the first settled agriculturalists in the world, or from the peoples living to their west in present-day Libya, who were driven into the Nile River basin by the growing aridity of the world. Cultivators, dependent as they were on the Nile floods, grew only a single, winter crop. The main cultigens were wheat, beans, berseem (Egyptian clover), lentils, barley, and chickpeas. Farmers maintained orchards and vineyards, which were the only lands that enjoyed year-round irrigation. These estates had to be walled off from the flood, which would destroy the trees and vines, and were watered regularly from wells and reservoirs. The Egyptians also possessed domesticated animals, notably cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs.

Although the Nile floods did most of the work in irrigating and renewing the soil, Egyptian cultivators employed a simple technology to lift river basin and canal waters on to the land when and as needed. Following the Amarna period of the New Kingdom, around 1200 BCE, Egyptians invented a simple device known as the *shaduf*, which, using a fulcrum, lifted a water bag that enabled cultivators to irrigate the lands from the spring and summer low-water Nile. *Shadufs* made it possible to grow winter crops, such as cotton and additional cereals. Later, during the Ptolemaic period the buffalo-driven water wheel, known as the *saqia*, and the Archimedean screw allowed farmers to make more than a very modest use of the low Nile waters that the *shaduf* alone had permitted. Egypt's vaunted agriculture, based on two and occasionally three crops per year, became reality only after the pharaonic period had come to an end and after Alexander the Great's conquest of the country in 332 BCE. (See plates 2 and 3 for illustrations of *shadufs* and *saqias* in use today.)

WHO WERE THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS?

But who were these early inhabitants of the Nile River basin? The question of their identity has roiled scholars and commentators.

Much of the debate revolves around the issue of whether the ancient Egyptians were African peoples, that is to say, people with black skins and the physical features that are prominent among African peoples today. Or were these ancient men and women living along the banks of the Nile similar to present-day Egyptians, who have olive-colored skins? In several books, particularly *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, the Senegalese writer Cheikh Anta Diop marshaled linguistic, literary, and artistic evidence in support of the theory that the ancient Egyptians were black Africans. Citing the writings of Herodotus on Egypt and asserting that the images on the friezes and paintings of the ancient Egyptians display unquestionably black African features, Diop asserted that "ancient Egypt was a Negro civilization," adding that "instead of presenting itself as an insolvent debtor, the Black world is the very initiator of the 'Western Civilization' flaunted before our eyes today."

The entry of Diop into the sacred domain of the Egyptologists has spurred a vigorous and informative set of replies. Here the consensus is that Diop was wrong in claiming that Herodotus described the ancient Egyptians as being black Africans. Quite the contrary, Herodotus and other classical authorities made a careful distinction between Egyptians and the black-skinned peoples who lived to the south, whom they referred to as Ethiopians. So, too, did Egyptian craftsmen of the time distinguish between themselves and peoples to the south. They depicted the latter in paintings, sculptures, and mosaics as black, while portraying Egyptians as mildly dark and Asians as having paler skins. Scenes from the tombs of Seti I and Ramses III in the Valley of the Kings in Upper Egypt offer a full array of the peoples with whom the Egyptians had contact. In them the Egyptians are shown as having reddish-brown skins.

More recently, a scholar of Chinese political thought, Martin Bernal, has thrust himself into this very same debate. Employing a provocative title, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, Bernal argues that the influence of Egypt on Greece and through Greece on Western civilization was profound but that generations of Western scholars, eager to show that the West owed its greatness to Indo-European achievements and not to African or

Semitic influences, denied the Egyptian contribution to the Western experience. Alas, Bernal's main point—the indebtedness of the West to Egypt—got lost in part because of the weakness of his scholarship, the heated responses from aggrieved classical scholars, who stepped forward to defend their field, and the always present controversy over whether the Egyptians were a black African people.

Of course, as modern scholarship has come to understand just how intermixed the peoples of the world truly are and how little genetic difference there is among the so-called races of the world, some scholars refuse to employ racial categorizations altogether. Instead, they identify peoples not by physical appearances but by languages. If, in fact, one uses language as the basis of determining who the ancient Egyptians were, the answer is clear and unequivocal. The early Egyptians were a people who spoke and wrote what linguistic scholars call an Afro-Asiatic or Hamitic-Semitic language, one of a body of languages based in North Eastern Africa and Southwest Asia that numbers among its branches Berber, Chadic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, Cushitic, and Arabic as well as ancient Egyptian.

Still, this retreat into identities, based on language, seems deeply unsatisfying. One should not allow racial prejudices to blind one from trying to offer physical descriptions of the ancient Egyptians since they exist in abundance in paintings, carvings, and even for that matter in mummified remains. Such an attempt can reasonably be made at the present time.

Roughly ten thousand years ago the growing aridity of Africa caused peoples living south, east, and west of the Nile River basin to flock into a region where they could grow crops, herd livestock, and sustain their traditional way of life. Thus, the earliest inhabitants of the Nile valley were of mixed African, North African, and Southwest Asian origins. Moreover, there were noticeable physical differences between the peoples living in Upper Egypt and those living in the delta in Lower Egypt. The Upper Egyptians were small, had long narrow skulls, dark wavy hair, and brown skins, while those of the delta and those who congregated around the region where present-day Cairo is located were taller and had broader skulls.

PREDYNASTIC HISTORY

Already by 5000 BCE the Egyptian portion of the Nile River basin, which had originally been only thinly occupied by fishing and herding peoples, had given way to a series of largely autonomous villages. At this time the inhabitants of this portion of the Nile River basin gave few hints that they would be among the first communities in world history to establish a central polity and a distinctive and unified culture. Most of the Nile River basin dwellers lived in tiny villages, subsisting on the grains that they cultivated, mainly wheat and barley, hunting, foraging, and fishing, and the produce of their domesticated animals—sheep, goats, and pigs. As yet, they had no written language. They probably spoke different dialects and had no massive irrigation works. Little status or wealth differences set one group of inhabitants off from another. The villagers, having only limited contact with their neighbors, lived in small mud hovels.

With the passage of time, these tiny villages were able to grow into important towns and eventually become cult centers for the worship of local gods, who were propitiated in order to ensure the fecundity of the land and provide stability to the lives of the peoples. The move to larger village communities was at this early stage more pronounced in Upper Egypt than in Lower Egypt, especially in the bigger Upper Egyptian settlements known as Naqada and Hierakonpolis. The south or Upper Egypt sustained its early advance over the north, and ultimately the communities living in the south found themselves strong enough to unify the whole of the Nile valley from the first cataract, just south of present-day Aswan, to the Mediterranean. Upper Egyptians, in addition to having spawned larger village settlements, also had the advantage of access to the mineral deposits in the hills of the eastern desert and Nubia, south of the first cataract.

Egypt's predynastic era divides into several distinct historical periods. The first of these, known as the Badrian period, named after the village of el-Badri, located in Upper Egypt, lasted roughly from 5500 to 4000 BCE. Little is known about these centuries except

that the Badrians were farmers who cultivated crops and managed herds. Some believe that they domesticated animals on their own. If, as seems more likely, they did not, their contact with cultures of Southwestern Asia, where domesticated animals were in use, enabled them to assimilate these skills. Many lived in tents made from animal skins. Next came the Naqada period, from 4000 to 3100 BCE, taking its name from the site of Naqada in Upper Egypt where the British Egyptologist Flinders Petrie discovered a cemetery in 1895 that contained more than 3,000 graves. The burials here were of a quite rudimentary nature, consisting of simple mats thrown over the bodies of the deceased, which in turn were deposited in pits. Yet the fact that men and women were burying their progenitors, rather than exposing them to the wild animals, suggests that these early humans regarded themselves as different, more exalted, than the rest of the animal world, perhaps even able to survive into an afterlife. Even at this early date, Egyptians buried the dead on the west bank of the Nile, where the sun set, presumably in hopes that like the sun, the dead, too, would arise and ascend into a new life after death.

By the Naqada II phase, life in Upper Egypt had become more complex. Social and occupational hierarchies existed. A privileged and wealthy class emerged. Its members engaged in hunting activities not in order to support themselves but as a symbol of their rank and their prestige. Some members of this group promoted long-distance trade, as the well-to-do sought to obtain luxury commodities from afar. Specialized artisans produced wares for the rest of society, fashioning more elaborate commodities for the well-to-do. The wealthy and powerful were now buried in larger, more elaborate tombs. Their bodies were surrounded by many of the very same objects of beauty and pleasure that they had enjoyed during their lives. Upper Egypt at the time had at least three relatively large urban conglomerations: Naqada, known as the gold town; Hierakonpolis, further south, and Abydos, where the necropolis of the first kings was located. Hierakonpolis was the most impressive of the three, possessing a wall that was 9.5 meters thick in places and inside which was an enclosed temple where scholars later found the Narmer

palette. Although Egypt lacked the magnificence that the cities of Sumer had at this time, the city of Hierakonpolis was a virtual twin of the great Mesopotamian city of Uruk. Indeed, artifacts found at Hierakonpolis suggest some actual connection and borrowing between the inhabitants of these two locations. Perhaps as many as 5,000 residents lived within the city walls of Hierakonpolis.

At the end of the Naqada III period, some time around 3100 BCE, Upper and Lower Egypt were united. The unification was not entirely peaceful. One major artifact of this era—the famed Narmer palette, discovered in 1898 and now prominently displayed in a Cairo museum—features a powerful ruling figure, who having caught one of his enemies by the hair—unquestionably a northerner—holds a mace over his head as he prepares to slay him. This smiting image became one of the standard motifs in Egyptian representation and was intended to demonstrate the power of the ruler. Certainly by 3000 BCE most of the Nile valley from the delta to Aswan was united.

The early kings of the first Egyptian dynasty were buried at Abydos, while Hierakonpolis had become a vital cult center for the god Horus. Although Egypt's cities were not as large as those in Mesopotamia, the territory had numerous urban centers, the remains of which have been covered up by Nile floods and later settlements. By the time that the famed third dynasty arrived on the scene, Egypt was a unified polity. It had developed a monumental style of royal architecture and buried its royalty in elaborate tombs.

EGYPT'S HISTORY MATTERS

Historians of Egypt of all ilks—Egyptologists, Coptologists, papyrologists, Islamists, and modernists—rarely wonder whether what they do has relevance. They know instinctively that it does. But the question deserves an answer. Perhaps Egypt's place in the world historical drama can be compared to the legendary appearances of movie character Forrest Gump, in the Oscar-winning movie of that same name. Forrest Gump, rather like Egypt and the Egyptians, seems to appear at all of the great historical moments. In the case of Egypt,

Figure 1. Narmer palette

however, its inhabitants often assumed a starring role. As the narrative of this volume will demonstrate, they did so by being one of the first communities to create centralized polities and complex social hierarchies. They also were innovators in one of humankind's most magnificent achievements—the invention of the alphabet. Although many of the symbols of hieroglyphs are pictograms and ideograms, standing for individual words, and others represent consonants, the Egyptians went a step further, pioneering the introduction of symbols that stood purely for the single letter in an alphabet.

Equally important to world history was the role that Egyptian cultivators played in supporting some of history's great empires. After the ancient culture of the pharaohs had given way, Greek and Roman conquerors looked to Egypt to feed their large imperial populations. So did later Fatimid, Mamluk, and Ottoman empire builders. In all of these imperial states, Egypt was the empire's most populous and prosperous state. Early Christianity owed much to Egyptian religious fervor, and Islamic conquerors, naturally, sought to implant their religion in this vital territory. Mamluk Muslims saved Egypt, North Africa, and possibly even Western Europe from the Mongol ambitions of world conquest, defeating a powerful Mongol army in Syria in 1260. The world's modern empire builders—the French, the British, and the Americans—have understood the strategic importance of Egypt, lying astride Europe, Africa, and Asia, and have wanted to incorporate it within their imperial structures.

There is also a great paradox in Egypt's fabled history. Once Egypt had been unified, 5,000 years ago, the territory and its inhabitants were to enjoy an extraordinary period of isolation from the outside world that permitted the dwellers along the banks of the Nile to promote a distinctive way of life and an internal unity that lasted uninterruptedly for 1,500 years, right down to the Hyksos invasion around 1500 BCE. For a millennium and a half, the deserts, the Nile cataracts, and the Mediterranean proved insuperable barriers from the outside. They allowed the Egyptians to perfect the institutions of the pharaonic era (described in chapters 2 and 3) and to create a sense of Egyptianness that has weathered a long line of

conquerors and foreign empire builders. In many ways, the long sweep of Egyptian history is a tale of how a people that had originally established a proud sense of their unique religious, political, economic, and cultural identity over a nearly three-thousand-year history then struggled to retain their Egyptianness in the face of a long line of conquerors.

In his oft-quoted *Egypt's Liberation: The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Egypt's longtime president and revolutionary leader Gamal Abdel Nasser argued that, historically, Egypt functioned within the orbits of three circles and that Egypt's role in world affairs was dictated by its central location in these settings. The first of these was an Arab circle, but equally important were the African and Islamic contexts. "It is not without significance that our country is situated west of Asia, in contiguity with the Arab states with whose existence our own is interwoven. It is not without significance, too, that our country lies in northeast Africa, overlooking the Dark Continent, wherein rages a most tumultuous struggle between white colonizers and black inhabitants for control of its limited resources. . . . All these are fundamental realities with deep roots in our lives which we cannot—even if we try—escape or forget."

Nasser was a formidable leader, deeply schooled in his country's history. In the preceding passage Nasser speaks of the primacy of geography in Egyptian history, its vital location at the corner of Africa and Asia. Here, too, he stresses Egypt's ties with what we today call the third world and that he identified as the world emerging from European colonialism. Yet his account is historically impoverished, as this study will demonstrate, for Egypt was also completely tied to the world of the Mediterranean Sea. Its influences on Europe and Europe's influences on it, so apparent at virtually all stages of the country's history, get short shrift in Nasser's reading of Egyptian history. But the pharaohs influenced the Greeks, who, along with the Romans, occupied Egypt and sank deep roots into the Egyptian mentality. Egypt was the most Christian of countries until the Arab-Muslim conquest of the seventh century, after which its primacy within Islam knew few limits. Yet in the nineteenth century the

Egyptian khedive Ismail could proclaim that Egypt had finally joined the European concert of nations, and during the British occupation, Egypt's centrality within the British Empire was never gainsaid. Identity and place in world historical events are issues writ large in the history of this magnificent territory.

LEARNING ABOUT EGYPT IN MUSEUMS

Egypt has an abundance of world-class museums that make experiencing the history and seeing the artifacts of the country a joy. Perhaps, however, first-time visitors should prepare themselves by going to one of their own national museums, almost all of which abound with artifacts from the pharaonic period. For Americans the Metropolitan Museum of Art is an obvious choice. Its superb ancient Egyptian collection includes an entire wing of the museum devoted to the splendid temple of Dendur, originally built 80 miles south of Aswan in Nubia by the Roman governor of Egypt around 15 BCE and now gloriously reassembled through the good offices of the Egyptian government. The Egyptians offered it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a token of gratitude to American taxpayers whose generosity enabled the government to save many monuments that would otherwise have been submerged by the Aswan high dam constructed in the 1960s. For Britons the British Museum has an even more extensive collection of Egyptian antiquities, topped off by the Rosetta Stone, which literally greets visitors as they proceed into the rooms that house the Egyptian materials.

Yet these extraordinary collections pale next to the objects on display at the Egyptian Museum, located right off the main square in the center of Cairo, inside an inspiring pink stucco building, first open to the public in 1902. It has on display some 120,000 objects with another 150,000 stored in the basement. Here, too, visitors upon entering encounter one of Egypt's most important artifacts—the Narmer palette, already described and pictured in this chapter, the iconic symbol of territorial unity. Yet few pause before the Narmer palette, so eager are they to reach the second floor, where

a plethora of rooms house what must be the world's most opulent collection—that of the Pharaoh Tutankhamen. Can one not help imagine what the tombs of other, longer-lived and more powerful pharaohs must have contained if this relatively minor pharaoh's tomb contained such treasures?

Cairo offers more. The Coptic Museum, built in 1947 and newly refurbished, located in Old Cairo in a residential area where many Copts live, has a stunning collection of Coptic art, probably the best in the world, as well as fine examples of textiles for which Coptic weavers were justly famous. The Museum of Islamic Art was the brainchild of the Egyptian khedive Tawfiq and displays pieces of medieval Islamic art that were gathered from the homes, mosques, and palaces of Cairo over the years. A magnificent replica of a wealthy Ottoman's house can be seen in the Gayer Anderson Museum, easily visited after viewing the Ahmad ibn Tulun mosque, one of Cairo's most magnificent.

There are impressive museums outside Cairo. Alexandria has the Graeco-Roman Museum, opened in 1892 by khedive Abbas, which displays beautiful tomb paintings and several busts of Alexander the Great. A small museum honoring the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy (1863–1933) exists in the flat where he lived during the last twenty-five years of his life, while not far away is the Cecil Hotel, now restored to some measure of its interwar greatness, when it served as a meeting place for literary and cosmopolitan Alexandrians, including the British novelist Lawrence Durrell, best known for his *Alexandria Quartet*. Finally, not to be missed is the new library of Alexandria, opened in 2002 and standing prominently on the corniche. The wall surrounding the building, made of Aswan granite, is etched with letters from most of the languages of the world. At present, the library's holdings are not large, but the administration aspires to assemble a collection of some 8 million books.

The most recent museum is the Nubian Museum at Aswan. Opened in 1997 and displaying many objects from Nubia that would otherwise have been submerged by Lake Nasser behind the high dam of Aswan, it is a gem. Its architecture, the gardens sur-

rounding the structure, the layout of the collection, and the beauty and uniqueness of the Nubian artifacts reflect the skill of its Egyptian architect, Mahmud al-Hakim, and the love and devotion of the men and women who combed the region to assemble the pieces on view there.