The Land of Egypt

Ancient Egypt existed in a landscape of extremes, with vast expanses of arid desert bordering a narrow ribbon of wonderfully fertile land – and very little has changed to this day.

The Nile is Egypt’s lifeblood. North of Aswan it flows for 900km (560 miles) through the Nile Valley until it reaches the Delta, which it traverses in a number of branches (five during the pharaonic period) before feeding its muddy water into the Mediterranean Sea. The silt it deposits is thick and black, inspiring the ancient Egyptians’ name for their country, Kemet (‘Black Land’). In contrast, the barren desert cliffs were seen to glow pink at dawn, so the desert was described as Deshret (‘Red Land’).

In ancient times, the Egyptian name for the summer season was Akhet, or Inundation. It was equivalent to the four months from July to October, when the great river overflowed its banks and flooded the Nile Valley and the Delta.

The huge volume of water originated as rain in central Sudan, raising the level of the White Nile. A few weeks later the summer monsoon rain in the Ethiopian highlands caused a very rapid swelling of the Blue Nile, and its tributary, the Abbara. All of these sources of water combined, reaching Egypt in a great swollen rush at the end of July. Only in 1968 were the waters of the River Nile finally tamed by the construction of the Aswan Dam. The Nile Valley is no longer flooded every year, and this has made a huge difference to Egypt’s natural environment and way of life.

As well as providing ancient Egypt with, usually, two healthy harvests a year, the Nile was the principal means of transportation. It supplied much of the protein in the people’s diet (in the form of fish and water birds). Ivory came from the tusks of the hippopotami that lived in the river, and papyrus was made from reeds that grew along its banks.

Finally, the river was the source of mud, the chief ingredient of the most widely used building material – mudbricks. At the same time, the river could be treacherous: hippopotami, crocodiles, winds, currents, shallow waters and cataracts were all hazards that had to be taken seriously by the people whose lives depended on the Nile.

 Scenes of agricultural life were commonly painted on the walls of private tombs. Here in their Theban tomb Senmedjem and his wife harvest their bountiful crops. c.1200 BC.
The impregnable desert
The river was not the only place where danger lurked. The ancient Egyptians also particularly feared the desert. It was a place of searing heat by day and freezing cold by night, a waterless place of wild animals, fugitives and nomads. The desert dwellers often turned out to be marauders, and in addition there were countless demons who were supposed to live in the desert.

On the other hand, much of the greatness of the Egyptian civilization came from wealth yielded by the inhospitable desert. Its treasures included amethyst, turquoise, copper, limestone, sandstone, granite and — above all — gold. The desert lands also fulfilled another important function: they helped to make Egypt into an almost impregnable fortress. To either side of the Nile were the wastelands of the Eastern and Western, or Libyan, Deserts, to the north the Mediterranean Sea, and in the south was the First Cataract of the Nile, which made the river unnavigable at that point. Egypt was protected from almost any outside threat. This resulted in an exceptionally stable society, and a strong sense of national identity flourished. A fear of the unknown resulted in a common mistrust of outsiders or foreigners (who were often described as hesy, meaning ‘vile’ or ‘wretched’).

Harnessing nature
The ancient Egyptians were self-sufficient in most things, except for suitable timber for building. The agricultural cycle revolved around the Nile flood, which could usually be depended on. Measuring gauges known as Nilometers were used to record the flood levels, so that suitable precautions might be taken if necessary. Efficient irrigation was crucial to agriculture. Farmers practised basin irrigation: they built earth banks to divide up areas of the flood plain, then led water into these artificial ponds and allowed it to stand before draining it off. The system could be administered on a local level.

The major crops were emmer wheat, barley and flax. Tomb scenes and models illustrate the various stages: ploughing, sowing the seed, harvesting, winnowing, threshing, and so on. Also depicted are the production of food and drink, such as grape-picking, wine pressing, brewing and breadmaking.

The dual benefits of the Nile and the sun made the land of Egypt a flourishing place. But as with all natural elements, there had to be precautions against their dangerous aspects. As protection against the overwhelming heat of the sun, people had to wear headcoverings to guard against sunstroke, and protected their eyes by wearing green malachite (copper) or black galena (lead) eye paints. Rain is not usually associated with Egypt, but it did occur in the north, and sometimes caused floods in the desert wadis; such problems had to be coped with. It therefore becomes clear that the lives of the ancient Egyptians were very much dictated by their natural environment and the climate. 

▲ The Nilometer within the temple complex at Kom Ombo was constructed to gauge the river’s rising level during the annual inundation.