

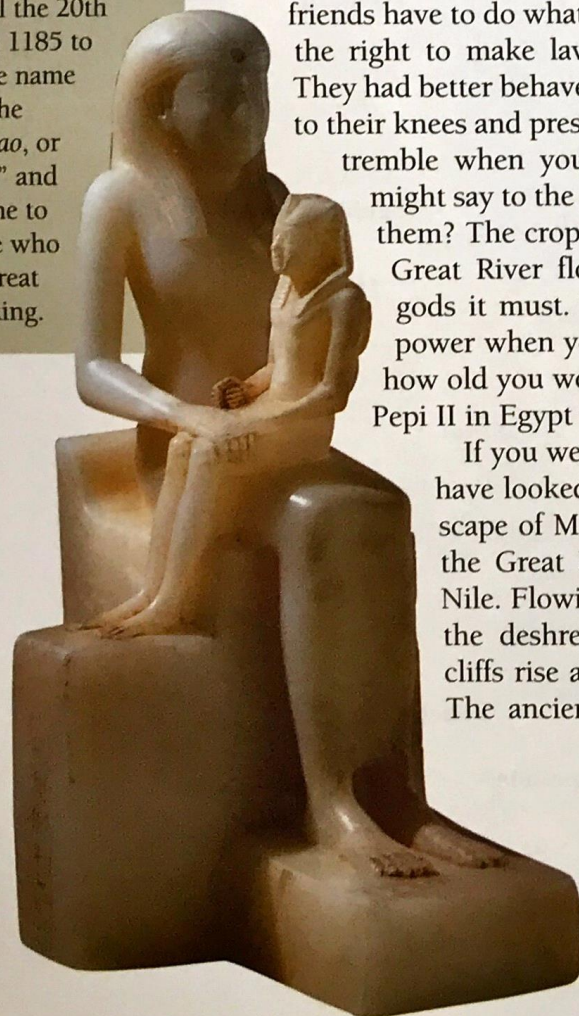
## CHAPTER 1

YOU RULE  
THE GEOGRAPHY OF EGYPT

66 THE HYMN TO  
THE NILE AND  
INSCRIPTIONS  
ON THE TOMB  
OF HARKHUF

## PHARAOH WHO?

Today we call all Egyptian kings “pharaohs,” but ancient Egyptians didn’t use the term until the 20th dynasty, from 1185 to 1070 BCE. The name comes from the Egyptian *per-ao*, or “great house,” and over time came to mean the one who lived in the great house—the king.



Imagine you are the king of Egypt. Strut about a bit, you can. After all, you’re the supreme ruler—the Pharaoh, the Great One. You command armies. If you say fight, they fight to the death. You have thousands of servants—a few just to fan you with ostrich feathers when you’re feeling a tad overheated. Your brothers and sisters, parents, teachers, and friends have to do what you order. YOU have inherited the right to make laws and dole out punishments. They had better behave. When you walk by, people fall to their knees and press their noses into the dirt. Some tremble when you pass—who knows what you might say to the gods the next time you speak to them? The crops grow because you say so. The Great River flows because you convince the gods it must. Now imagine wielding all that power when you are only six years old. That’s how old you would be if you were the Pharaoh Pepi II in Egypt 4,000 years ago.

If you were Pepi II, your kingdom would have looked a lot like the barren, red landscape of Mars if it weren’t for one thing—the Great River, a river we now call the Nile. Flowing north, the Nile cuts through the deshret, or the red land. Limestone cliffs rise above the river like castle walls. The ancient Egyptians said the gods put

*In this statue, Pepi II sits regally, wearing the royal headdress. He is carved to look like a miniature adult, but even kings sit on their mothers’ laps when they are young. Some scholars believe Pepi II ruled for 94 years—the longest reign in Egyptian history.*

those cliffs there to protect them. In fact, your entire kingdom is surrounded by natural barriers that protect it. To the east and west, the desert keeps out invaders. To the north, before the Nile dumps into the sea, it branches out into a triangle of marshland we call the Delta (it would be hard for your enemies to march through a swamp). And to the south the Nile protects your kingdom again, this time with a series of rocky rapids called the Cataracts.

Without the Nile you wouldn’t have much of a kingdom to rule. Strutting might seem a bit silly. Egypt would be home to nothing more than a few wandering bands of nomads passing through the red land, dusty and dragging from the relentless heat, in search of the rare oasis. The Nile, however, the glorious Nile, brought a narrow band of life to Egypt. It carried rich, black dirt and spread it over the floodplains, creating fields for the Egyptians to plant their seeds. The Egyptians called it khemet—the black land. The change from red land to black land was so abrupt you could straddle the border, standing with one foot in red earth and the other in black.

The ancient Egyptians knew that without the Great River they would have no villages, no fields of wheat, and no cattle. To them the water was sacred. They believed it flowed from paradise and could heal the sick. They wrote songs to the Nile—praising its life-giving force. *The Hymn to the Nile* began “Hail to thee O, Nile!” and praised the Great River for coming “to give life to Egypt.” It may seem as if the ancients got carried away with their praise when they sang, “If you cease your toil and your work, then all that exists is in anguish.” But if the Nile did “cease its toil,” the people would starve. Maybe they weren’t so carried away after all.

Life in Egypt revolved around the Great River. Our seasons come and go, marked by weather changes, but not so in Egypt, where the sun always shines. In Egypt the seasons were marked by changes in the Nile. The first of the three seasons began in July. Egyptians called it akhet. During akhet, heavy rain in Ethiopia poured down from the highlands, swelling streams that fed the Nile. The banks of the

THAT’S ONE GIANT  
LETTER!

The fourth letter of the Greek alphabet, delta, is shaped like a triangle. Early in the sixth or fifth centuries BCE, Greek geographers named the triangle of land in Egypt where the Nile fans out into several smaller rivers and then flows into the Mediterranean Sea after their own letter “delta” because of its similar shape. By 450 BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus writes about Egyptians living “in that region which is called the Delta.”

66 *The Hymn to the Nile*, about 2100 BCE



The green of the Nile Valley contrasts dramatically with the sandy desert. After the summer's torrential rainfalls on the Ethiopian highlands, the swollen Nile sweeps into the Nile Valley, flooding it with fertile soil and water.

Nile overflowed. Flooding may not sound like a good thing, but to the Egyptians it was a very good thing. Those floods left behind that black earth for planting. During the floods, farmlands were covered with water. Everyone uneasily watched the water rise. Would there be enough water? Would the Nile bring enough of that rich, black earth for farmers to plant their seeds? Or would there be too much water? Would whole villages be washed away? It was a delicate

balance. If you were the supreme ruler, it would be your job to work it out with the gods so that things went well. You worked with Hapi, the god of the Great River, and more importantly, with the god in charge of the floods, the one with the ram's head—Khnemu. It was your job to be sure there was *ma'at*, or balance—not too much, not too little.

The Egyptians watched the flood levels obsessively. They measured the water and recorded it. They compared their measurements to the good years. They compared their measurements to the bad years. Everywhere you went, people would have had an opinion on this year's flood level. People talked in the market place. People talked along the roads, over dinner, while washing clothes at the riverbank. Would this be a good year? Would the granaries be full? Or would this be a bad year? Would they suffer the anguish they sang about in *The Hymn to the Nile*?

At first the Egyptians simply marked the riverbank to measure the height of the Nile. But it wasn't long before the Egyptians invented measuring devices. We call them nilometers. Some looked like a giant yardstick made from marble. Other nilometers were even more elaborate. Workers dug staircases into wells and erected engraved pillars marked to gauge how high the water rose.

After the flood months, when the water finally receded and left behind rich, black earth, farmers scattered their

seeds, the first of several plantings. The second season—peret—had begun. Farmers lifted water from the steady flowing river with shadufs, devices that looked like catapults. With a bucket for dipping on one end of a pole, and a counterweight to make lifting easy on the other, the shadufs creaked and groaned while farmers raised and pivoted the buckets to fill channels that snaked through their gardens.

Farmers tended their fields with care into the third season—shemu. During shemu the level of the Nile dropped, and many side channels dried up. The land parched and the desert seemed to close in. The red sands inched toward the villages. Near the end of shemu, Egyptians began to fret and worry. Would the Nile ever rise again? Had the gods forgotten to release the waters? They sang, “they dread him who creates the heat,” and they sacrificed birds and gazelles for the return of the Nile's floodwaters. And then the cycle repeated. “Hail to thee, O Nile! Who . . . comes to give life to Egypt!”

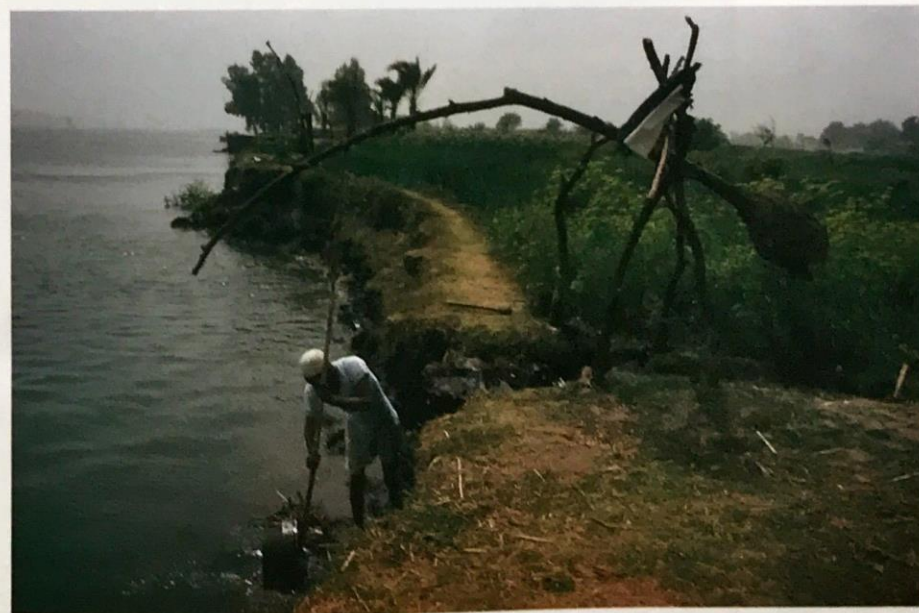
66 *The Hymn to the Nile*, about 2100 BCE



#### MEANWHILE IN ETHIOPIA . . .

Ancient Egyptians kept such good flood records that scientists today use their data to better understand rainfall patterns.

Weather forecasters study a phenomenon called El Niño. El Niño is a disruption in ocean currents that affects rainfall. It happens to cause droughts in Ethiopia. Rainfall in Ethiopia determines the flood levels of the Nile.

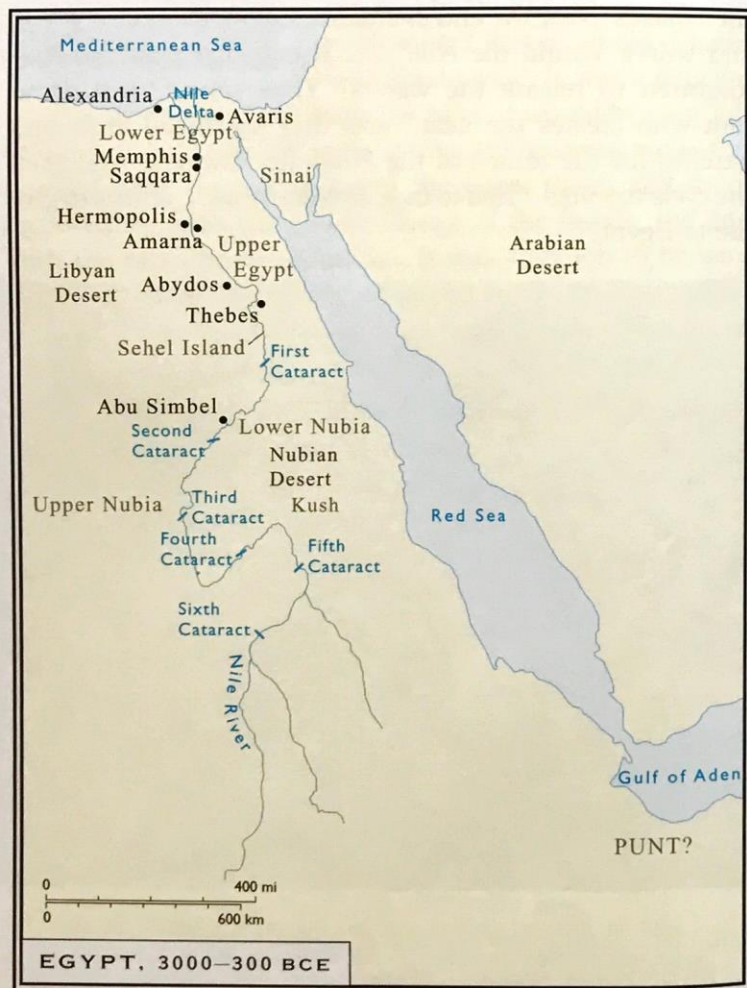


The shaduf has a bucket hanging from one end and a weight on the other. The farmer lowers the bucket into the Nile, and when it's full, he lets go and the counterweight lifts the heavy bucketful of water. Farmers still use shadufs today.

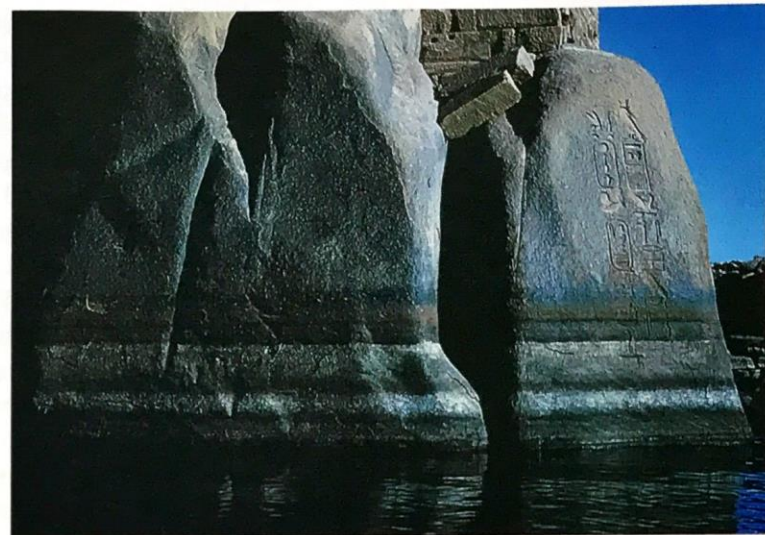
## CAMEL-NOT

Although we picture camel caravans plodding across the sand dunes of the Egyptian desert, Harkhuf and his fellow traders traveled with donkeys. Camels weren't used to carry goods and people until very late in the sixth century BCE, nearly 2,000 years after Harkhuf's time.

Most Egyptians centered their lives around the Nile, but a few explored the countries surrounding Egypt. When Pepi II was nearly nine years old, he wrote to a man who had started his career when he was a young boy just like Pepi II. The man's name was Harkhuf. Harkhuf came from a family of explorers and had traveled with his father before making journeys on his own. Harkhuf led donkey caravans south across the desert to explore inner Africa. The details of Harkhuf's journeys are engraved just to the right of the entrance to his tomb located near the First Cataract of



Priests anxiously watched the markings on nilometers such as this one to see how high the floodwaters would rise and compare that height with records of good years and bad. Later, tax rates were determined by the height of the yearly flood—then it was the tax collectors eagerly watching.



the Nile in Aswan. The long inscription begins high overhead on a chalkboard-sized area of the wall and continues down to waist level. Harkhuf begins his inscription with a little bragging about how he behaved in life. "I was excellent," he says, and goes on to tell of how his family loved and praised him. He writes about returning with 300 donkeys loaded with gifts for the Pharaoh. How would you like someone bringing you 300 donkeys loaded down with gifts, O Great One?

Clearly, Harkhuf is proud of a letter written to him by the boy-king Pepi II. The letter would have turned to dust long ago if Harkhuf hadn't been so honored by it that he carved it in stone. The letter from Pepi II is addressed to Harkhuf, calling him the chief of the desert rangers, the caravan conductor, and is dated: "Royal seal, year 2, third month of the first season, day 15." This shows us that Pepi II wrote to Harkhuf toward the end of the flood season in the second year of his reign, about 2276 BCE. The letter has tones of the royal-ness Pepi II must have been developing even at his young age, but it also shows that when you're only eight years old, it's hard to escape being a kid—even if you are a supreme ruler.

Pepi II wrote that he knew Harkhuf spent day and night with the caravan "doing that which thy lord desires, praises and commands." Not bad to have everyone running around trying to please you when you are barely nine. "Thy lord" has a nice ring to it, too.

66 Harkhuf's tomb inscription, Aswan, about 2250 BCE

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Despite all his power, Pepi II was still a young boy after all, and it was impossible for him to keep the excitement out of his letter. He had learned that Harkhuf was bringing home someone from the fabulous race of short people called pygmies. The talents of this particular dancing pygmy were so amazing that he was said to perform “the dance of the gods.” Imagine waiting for someone *that* entertaining to arrive. Pepi II was having a little trouble waiting. “Come north to the Palace at once! Drop everything—hurry and bring that pygmy you have brought, alive, happy and well, for the divine dances, to gladden the heart, to delight the heart of the king who lives for ever!” (There’s another king-ly bonus—living forever.)

Pepi II wanted to be sure the dancing pygmy arrived unharmed. He ordered:

get trusty men to stand around him on the gang-plank—don’t let him fall in the water! When he goes to bed at night, get trusty men to lie all round him in his hammock. Inspect him ten times a night! My majesty longs to see this pygmy more than all the treasure of Sinai and Punt!

Despite Harkhuf’s major expeditions and all the riches he and other traders brought back to Egypt—from Nubia with all its gold, Sinai with all its turquoise, and Punt with all its incense—it was this dancing pygmy that captured the heart of Pepi II. And the letter written by the boy-king remained so important to Harkhuf that at the end of his days he chose to record it on his tomb. If you were the supreme ruler of Egypt 4,000 years ago, what kinds of letters would you write? What songs would you sing to the Nile? Think about it while your servants fan you with ostrich feathers. But you might want to be careful how you order your teachers around.

*Harkhuf the explorer hikes with his walking stick on his tomb wall. When Harkhuf traveled, he preferred to use the safe desert routes. If his needs for food and water forced him to travel near the Nile, he hired soldiers to protect him from robbers.*

“ Harkhuf’s tomb inscription, Aswan, about 2250 BCE

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