Reading # 5

Pyramids on the Nile

Section I: The Geography of Egypt

An ancient Greek historian once said that Egypt is "wholly the gift of the Nile." Without the Nile, Egypt would be swallowed up by barren deserts that surround it. While the desert protected Egypt from invasion, it also limited where people could settle. For this reason, farming villages sprung up all along the Nile beginning in 2700 B.C. During these ancient times, Egyptians eagerly awaited the annual flooding of the Nile River. It soaked the land with life-giving water and deposited a layer of rich silt, or soil. The flooding of the Nile made the Egyptian people very happy. During this time, people had to cooperate to control the Nile floods. They built irrigation ditches to channel the rising river water and store water for the dry season. The flooding of the Nile was so predictable that the Egyptians developed a yearly calendar based on the Nile.

Cities in ancient Egypt grew out of the development of agriculture. They consisted mostly of mud-brick houses built along the Nile River. Unfortunately, our knowledge about Egyptian cities, and settlements in general is very limited. Settlements and cities were located on the floodplain, with close proximity to the Nile, in order to receive goods by boat and for its source of water. Unlike temples and tombs, most housing and public buildings in these cities and settlements were made of mud-brick. People travelled and traded all along the Nile.

Another early civilization arose along the banks of the Nile River of East Africa. The Nile flows to the North, toward the Mediterranean Sea. It, too, floods each year. The waters leave rich soil on the river banks. There the people of ancient Egypt grew food and began to build their own culture. They worshipped the Nile as a life-giving god.

For many centuries, the people of Egypt lived in two Kingdoms, Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt extended north from the Nile’s first area of rapids to the Nile delta. The delta is a broad, marshy, triangular area of rich land. Lower Egypt began here and continued north to the Mediterranean, just 100 miles away.

Section II: The Age of Pharaohs and Pyramids

Egyptian rulers were called pharaohs during ancient times. They worked hard to organize a strong centralized state. Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was a god. As a result, the pharaoh was given absolute power (total control). This meant that he owned and ruled all of the land in Egypt.

Pharaohs took pride in preserving justice and order. A pharaoh depended on a vizier or chief minister, to supervise the business of government. Under the vizier, many different departments called bureaus looked after matters such as tax collection, farming and the all-important irrigation system. Thousands of scribes carried out the vizier's instructions. These individuals were all members of Egypt's social pyramid which also included at the bottom of the pyramid peasant farmers, then slaves.
During the time of the pharaohs, Egyptians built the majestic pyramids that still stand at Giza, near present-day Cairo. The pyramids were tombs for eternity. Because Egyptians believed in an afterlife they preserved the bodies of the dead rulers and provided them with everything they would need in their new lives.

To complete the pyramids, workers hauled and lifted millions of limestone blocks that weighed an average of 2 ½ tons each. The pyramid builders had no iron tools or wheeled vehicles. Workers quarried each stone by hand, pulled them on sleds to the site, and hoisted them up earthen ramps to be placed on the slowly rising structure. Building a pyramid took so many years that often a pharaoh would begin building a tomb as soon as he inherited the throne.

The pyramids suggest the strength of ancient Egyptian civilization. These costly projects took years to complete and required enormous planning and organization. Thousands of farmers, who had to be fed each day, worked on the pyramids when not planting or harvesting crops.

Section III: Egyptian Religious Practices

Egyptians had a variety of religious beliefs and practices. They were polytheistic, believed in many gods. In the sun-drenched land of Egypt, the chief god was the sun god, Ra. Osiris, the god of the underworld and god of the Nile was also especially important. Egyptians believed he controlled the annual flood that made the land fertile.

Belief in the afterlife affected all Egyptians. To give a soul use of its body in the afterlife, Egyptians perfected skills in mummification, the preservation of the dead. Skilled embalmers removed vital organs, then dried and wrapped the body in strips of linen. This costly process took months to complete. At first, mummification was a privilege reserved for rulers and nobles. Eventually, ordinary Egyptians also won the right to mummify their dead. Many pharaohs were buried in the desolate Valley of the Kings. Their tombs filled with fantastic riches, were a temptation to robbers in ancient times.

Section IV: Record Keeping

Like other civilizations, the ancient Egyptians developed a form of picture writing. Hieroglyphics were used to keep important records. Early on, priests and scribes carved hieroglyphics on stone. Over time, scribes learned to make a paper-like writing material from papyrus, a plant that grew along the banks of the Nile. Writing with reed pens and ink on the smooth surface of papyrus strips was much easier than chiseling words onto stone.

After the decline of Ancient Egypt, Egyptians forgot the meanings of ancient hieroglyphics. For thousands of years no one was able to decipher this ancient language. Not until the early 1800's did a French scholar unravel the mysterious writings on Egypt's great monuments. Jean Champollion managed to decipher, or decode the Rosetta Stone. This flat, black stone has the same message carved in three different forms or writing, one being hieroglyphics. By comparing the three versions Champollion patiently worked out the meanings of many hieroglyphic symbols.
ANCIENT EGYPT GEOGRAPHY

1. Describe the relative location of Ancient Egypt (Where was it located? On What continent? What physical features surrounded it?, Etc)

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2. What geographic feature does the civilization revolve around?
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3. Look at your map and predict what challenges you think Egyptians faced because of their geographic environment: Explain your response.
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4. Why is Upper Egypt south of Lower Egypt?
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