The Environment of the Nile Valley & Surrounding Area
Natural Geography
vs.
Cultural & Political Geography
Egypt is characterized by a hot, almost rainless climate.

Even along the Mediterranean - where you would expect much more precipitation - rainfall is less than 200 mm.

The annual rainfall for the entire country is 10 mm.
The Greek historian Herodotus said that Egypt was the gift of the Nile.

The Nile river was the most dominant geographic feature influencing the daily life of the ancient Egyptians.
When Egyptians traveled to other lands, they noticed that the Rivers ran the “wrong” way.

A text of Thutmose I (16th Century BC) describe the Euphrates as “the inverted water that goes downstream in going upstream.”
The Nile’s northward flow is also important because its the basis for modern geographic terminology:

- **Southern Egypt** is referred to as Upper Egypt,
- Northern part of Upper Egypt (from Asyut to the Faiyum) referred to as **Middle Egypt**
- The delta, or northern Egypt, is known as **Lower Egypt**.
During ancient times, Egypt was (very generally) divided into four main geographic areas:

- Imaginary intersection of the river and the east west passage of the sun.
- The river flowed from the valley to the delta (south to north).
The Nile Delta

The delta, representing 63 percent of the inhabited area of Egypt, extends approximately 200 km from south to north, and 400 km from east to west.
Today the Nile flows through the delta via two principal branches, the Rosetta and the Damietta.

In antiquity there were three principal channels, known in Pharonic times as:

- The Water of Pre
- The Water of Ptah
- The Water of Amun
The coast of the delta it is a marshy area, called the Bareri, interspersed with lagoons and lakes.

There are 4 major lakes in the Delta

The northern shores of these lakes are separated from the sea by strips of sand forming street, regular borders, but the southern shores are irregular and often grade into marshes and swamps.
The most dominant topographic feature in the Delta are *Geziras* - deposits of sand, sandy clay that rise from 1 to 12 meters above the surrounding area.

- the *Geziras* follow a northeast-southwest direction and divides the Delta into two parts
Along most of its course through Egypt, the Nile has scoured a deep, wide gorge in the desert plateau and deposited a thick layer of rich, dark silt on the Valley floor.

For 965 km between Cairo and Aswan, the Nile follows a generally south-north course that drops only 71 meters below sea level.
Desert Transition
Desert Transition
Eastern Desert
Kharga Oasis
Dakhla Oasis
**Red Land/Black Land**

- In antiquity, the Nile Valley was called **Kemet**, which means “Black Land,” in reference to the rich agricultural plain.

- The arid east and deserts outside the valley were collectively referred to as **Djseret**, which means “Red Land.”

- This dichotomy between Red Land and Black Land play a very important role in the history of ancient Egypt.
The Annual Inundation

The special character of the Nile, which made it so central to Egyptian culture, was its annual inundation.
- **JUNE** - the Nile began to rise between Cairo and Aswan.

- **AUGUST** - the waters of the Nile took on a muddy red color due to the presence of rich red earth brought into the Nile by the **Blue Nile** and the **Atbara**.

- **SEPTEMBER** - the river continued to rise until mid month

- **DECEMBER** - Waters started to recede

- As it receded, it deposited a thick bed of very nutrient rich silt and mud, which was extremely fertile and made for excellent agriculture.
The Egyptians understood the extent their lives and prosperity depended on the regularity of the inundation.

Excessive floods were also a source of fear.

Long periods of flooding reduced crop yields by favoring plant parasites and delaying the harvest until April, when the hot winds (referred to by Egyptians khamsin) would parch the crop.
• Low floods would have resulted in the floodplain remaining dry and devoid of fertile sediment.

• This kind of failure would lead to starvation, livestock destruction, seed stocks would be placed under severe pressure, and marginal lands would have to be abandoned.

• It is hardly an exaggeration to say that total economic disruption and total depopulation would be inevitable.
Causeway to the Pyramid of Unas (5th Dynasty)
The Nile as National Highway
Beyond its life bringing character, the Nile was also the principal corridor of transportation that ran through the country.

Because most villages were situated near the Nile. There was little incentive to develop complex land transport infrastructure (like roads).
A boat traveling south against the current could use sails, while one traveling north could easily paddle with the current.

Travel by means of the river was so common that the hieroglyph for the word “go north” was a boat without a sail, while the hieroglyph for the word “go south” was a boat with a sail.
Naqada II (ca. 3500 B.C.)
Old Kingdom
The Southern Boundary
The 1st Cataract (south of Aswan) was the traditional southern boundary of Egypt.

South of that was Nubia (Upper Nubia and Lower Nubia).

Throughout Egyptian history, Nubia was conquered (and re-conquered) and incorporated into the country.
First Cataract
Political Geography of Ancient Egypt
Capitals:

- Predynastic/Protodynastic: **Hierakonpolis (?)**
- Old Kingdom: **Memphis**
- First Intermediate Period: **Memphis/Heracleopolis/Thebes**
- Middle Kingdom: **Itj-tawy**
- Second Intermediate Period: **Thebes/Avaris**
- New Kingdom: **Thebes/Akhtaten/P-Ramses**
- Third Intermediate Period: **Thebes/Hermopolis/Heracleopolis/Memphis/Sais/Busaris/Leontopolis/Tanis**
- Late Period: **Sais/Mendes**
Nomess

- **Sepat** (Nome is a later greek term that came about during the Ptolomaic period)
- Egypt’s fundamental administrative districts (provinces)
- Nomarchs - governors
- Incredible cultural and political continuity dating back to the Predynastic
The Aswan High Dam
Aswan High Dam
Lake Nasser
Cultural Heritage & The Aswan Dam
Temple of Nefertari
Temple of Dendur
The End