

## **The Saylor Foundation's “Egypt’s Environment and the Origins of Egyptian Society”**

One of the earliest densely populated human societies to develop was Egypt (Kemet), which emerged in the lower Nile River valley. As Africa dried in the fifth to third millennium BCE, humans moved into river valleys and lake regions in Africa, and the Nile was among the most important of these. The Nile River—the longest river in the world—snakes its way across much of Africa. It is fed by two major sources: The White Nile begins all the way south on the humid, fecund shores of Lake Victoria, in Central Africa; the Blue Nile originates in the fertile mountains of the Ethiopian plateau. These two rivers meet near the modern city of Khartoum, in the Sudan, and wind their way across the Sahara Desert, bringing yearly floods that spread across the floodplain of central Egypt distributing the fertile soils of Africa.

The fertile region bordering the Egyptian Nile is divided into two general areas. The southern portion, or Upper Egypt, is really a thin valley, rarely more than a few miles wide. The northern portion, or Lower Egypt, is an enormous delta that spreads out in a roughly triangular shape. Along this river, much as along the Tigris and Euphrates to the north, farmers settled around 6000 BCE and began to cultivate the local riverine grains. Over a thousand years or so, these people began to settle into permanent Neolithic villages.

Every year, almost without fail, the Nile River would flood, bringing water and nutrients to the Egyptian soil. In years when the floods failed, Egyptian society faced social unrest, starvation, and sometimes collapse. In years when the floods came, food was plentiful, society was stable, and the surplus allowed for the development of the state, the feeding of workers who built infrastructure, and the support of priests and intellectuals.

Because the Nile was so important to life in Egypt, it was a central feature of religion and culture. The Nile—along with the god (Hapy) who represented it in Egyptian religiosity—was the subject of hymns and practices of worship, as well as celebrations of life, coming-of-age, the enthroning of kings, and even death. The river (along with Hapy) is depicted as a male with breasts, and thus able to reproduce, fertilize, and nurture. You will read one of the hymns to the Nile in the section below.