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classroom TUTORIALS

The River and the Two Lands



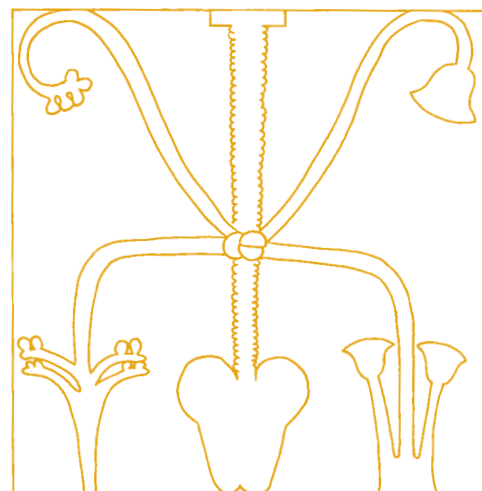
Egypt was one of the greatest civilizations of the ancient world. Its 3,000 year history and culture were shaped in large part by its unique geography and climate. The land of Egypt—located in the rainless and inhospitable desert of northeast Africa—was brought to life each year by the annual floodwaters of the Nile, called *Iteru* or “the river” by the ancient Egyptians.

The world’s longest river, the Nile begins its journey as rainfall in the highlands of east central Africa. The Blue and White Nile Rivers become one as they flow north, cutting through the sands of the Egyptian desert. Each spring, excess rain from the highlands carried rich soil deposits downriver. As the waters entered Egypt every year, they overflowed the river’s banks and left a fresh, wet layer of fertile soil along a stretch of land some 10 miles wide and 650 miles long. The Egyptians called this season of inundation *akhet*.

In southern Egypt near Aswan, tall cliffs flank the Nile River. The river is somewhat narrow there, only four miles across at its widest point. This area was known as Upper Egypt in ancient times. The area north of Cairo is much flatter and is almost at sea level. Here the river fans out and spreads over a maximum width of approximately 150 miles as it spills into the Mediterranean Sea. Known as the Nile Delta, this area was called Lower Egypt by the ancient Egyptians.

Even though Upper and Lower Egypt were unified early in Egyptian history, the pharaohs always claimed that they ruled over “the two lands.” A design element employed by the ancient Egyptians clearly illustrates this point. The *sema tawy* sign, seen here between the legs of the painted, white wooden chair of King Tutankhamun represented the unity of the two lands. The *sema tawy* depicts the two symbolic plants of Upper and Lower Egypt, the papyrus and the lily plant. The stems for these two plants intertwine around the hieroglyph for the human windpipe and lungs, which was the sign for “unite.” As such, the decorations underneath the seat of the king’s chair relayed the message that Upper and Lower Egypt were united under the king.

PHOTO
The *sema tawy* sign, seen here between the legs of the painted white wooden chair of King Tutankhamun
DRAWING
Sema tawy detail



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In addition to topographical differences, Egypt's natural environment is also one of great climatic contrast—dry and lifeless, rich and bountiful. The ancient Egyptians called the fertile land of the Nile Valley *Kemet*, or the black land. The vast, harsh desert beyond was *Desheret*, the red land. The annual cycle of the Nile was ordered and regular. In concert with the warm, sunny climate, it created a land of great abundance.

But there was also a dark side—the life-giving Nile harbored dangerously swift currents in which a person could easily drown, and wild animals like crocodiles and hippopotami that could drag down a human. One could get lost forever in the great desert. Foreign invaders threatened attack. Illness was ever present. Egyptians saw life as a battle between the opposing forces of order (*maat*) and chaos (*isfet*). Responsibility for keeping the forces of chaos in check and maintaining order belonged to the pharaoh.

The Nile Delta, as seen in a satellite photo.

