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Social Studies

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# Ancient Life Along the Nile

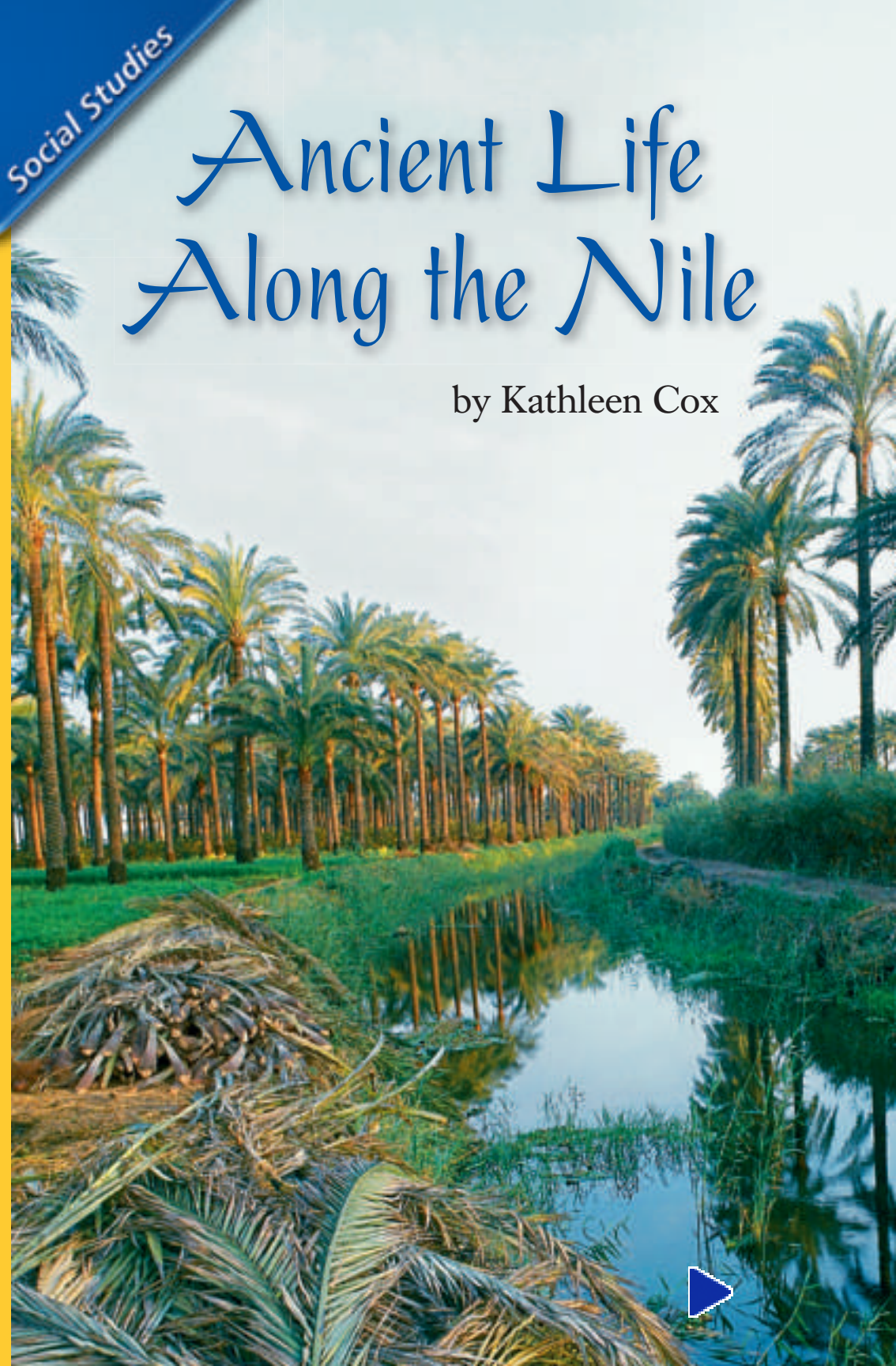
by Kathleen Cox

Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Expository nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Graphic Sources</li><li>• Main Idea and Details</li><li>• Summarize</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Heads</li><li>• Maps</li><li>• Captions</li><li>• Glossary</li></ul>

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# Ancient Life Along the Nile

by Kathleen Cox



## Vocabulary

abundant

artifacts

decrees

eternity

immortal

levees

receded

reigned

Word count: 3,194

Note: The total word count includes words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in chapter titles, captions, labels, diagrams, charts, graphs, sidebars, and extra features are not included.



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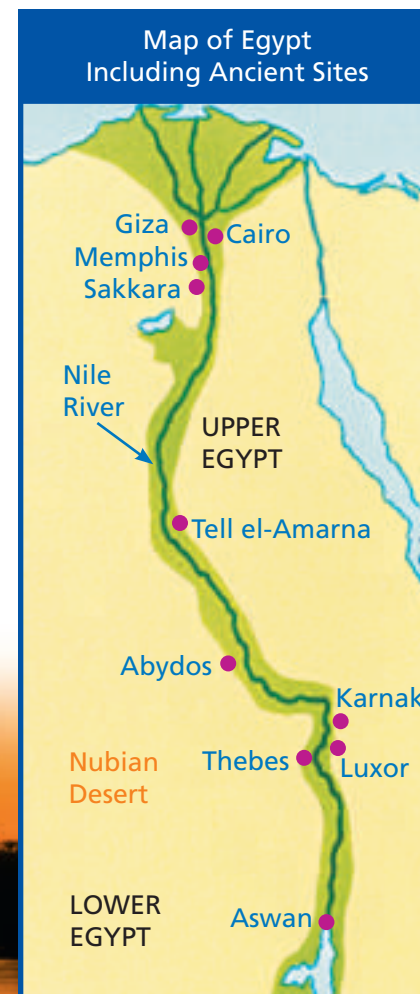


## The Nile River

Thousands of years ago, groups of people who had once been wandering nomads built settlements along the northern end of Africa's Nile River. The Nile is the world's longest river. It flows from the mountains of central Africa north to the Mediterranean Sea. These settlers lived along a six-hundred-mile stretch of land that extended to the Mediterranean coast. Here, the year-round climate was generally mild and dry. Over time, the settlements joined together and formed a series of kingdoms that became the great ancient Egyptian civilization. These kingdoms founded many large cities such as Memphis and Thebes.

Rulers called pharaohs **reigned** over the people of ancient Egypt. The pharaohs owned all the land. They first called themselves servants of the Egyptian gods. Later, they began to think of themselves as gods who lived among the common people. Their subjects accepted this belief and honored the pharaohs, just as they honored the other gods and goddesses in the temples.

Many cities grew up along the Nile River.



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The ancient Egyptians believed that **immortal** gods and goddesses controlled everything that happened in their universe. The gods had power over the movement of the sun, the growth of the people's crops, the success of their hunting and fishing, and the flow of the Nile. The people worshipped their gods and goddesses and hoped that they, in return, would shower the people with good fortune.

Everyone in the kingdom of Egypt worked for the pharaoh. Priests watched over the spiritual well-being of the kingdom. Scribes, who were writers, kept records for the kingdom. They wrote the pharaoh's **decrees**, which informed the citizens of new laws and new taxes. Artists, sculptors, and architects created magnificent structures and artwork, which brought glory to the pharaohs. Other craftsmen shaped soft clay into useful storage containers and pots. Laborers created simple clay homes for the people, boats with delicate papyrus sails, and vast systems of canals that stretched throughout the land.

The Nile River was the center of life in ancient Egypt. Most people in Egypt were farmers. They depended on the river to water the crops that provided most of the harvested food for the kingdom. Other people raised livestock near the Nile. Fishermen brought in the daily catch from the river.

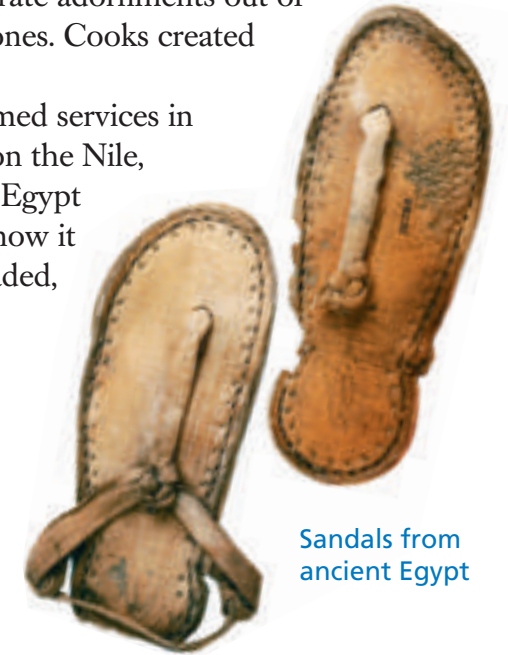


The temple of Ramses II sits on the banks of the Nile River, the center of ancient Egyptian culture.



Another group of citizens provided important services for the people, especially the upper class. Cobblers created leather sandals. Seamstresses and tailors stitched up comfortable clothing to wear in Egypt's warm climate. Jewelers made elaborate adornments out of bronze, gold, and colorful stones. Cooks created meals for the upper classes.

The workers who performed services in the kingdom still depended on the Nile, though not directly. Ancient Egypt did not have money as we know it today. People bartered, or traded, for goods. Cobblers bartered sandals for food. Farmers bartered bags of grain for pottery.



Sandals from ancient Egypt



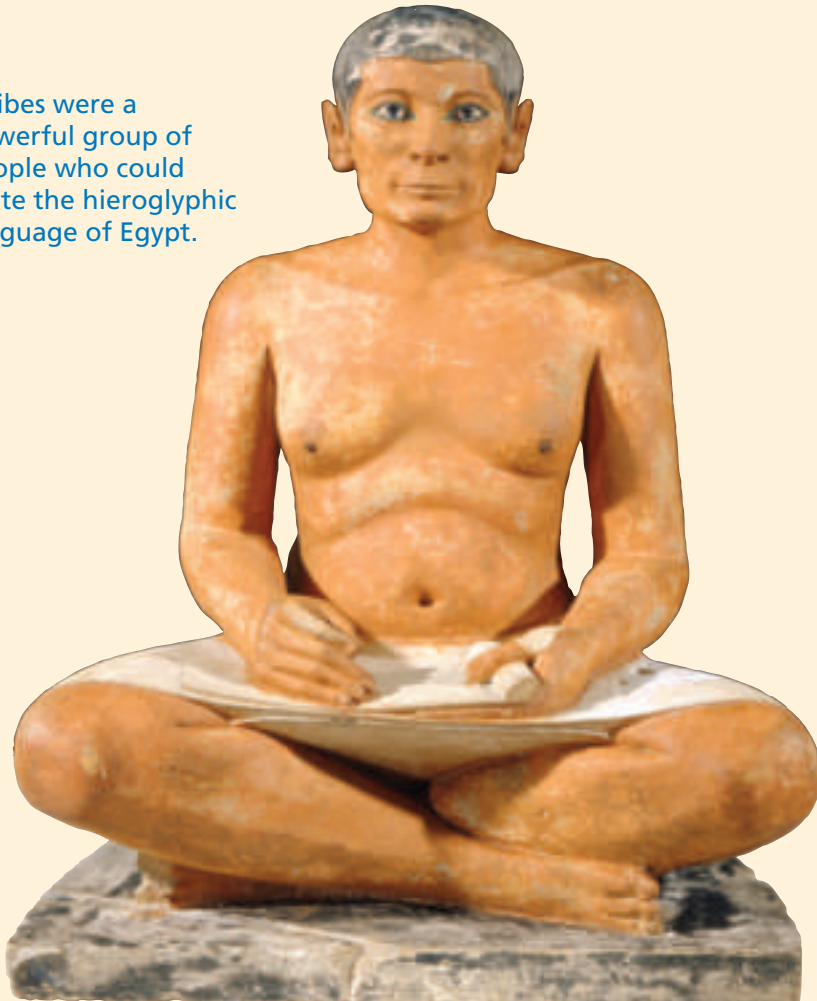




## Writing in Ancient Egypt

Only a very small number of men and women in ancient Egypt knew how to read and write. These people were called scribes. Some scribes were temple priests or administrators who ran the day-to-day activities of the kingdom. Others became architects who helped design the great structures and cities. Scribes worked under the pharaoh and other members of the royalty. They belonged to a very high class.

Scribes were a powerful group of people who could write the hieroglyphic language of Egypt.



In ancient Egypt, reading and writing meant learning how to read and draw a series of specific pictures. Each picture conveyed an idea or a sound. These picture words are called hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphic writing is one of the oldest systems of writing in the world.

Scribes had to memorize and master the creation of more than seven hundred hieroglyphics. Each picture had to be drawn exactly, or it could be misread. Scribes also studied mathematics and other subjects that were important to the pharaoh and the kingdom.

When scribes wrote hieroglyphic messages, they drew a group of pictures that told a story or conveyed important information. Much of the knowledge we have about daily life in ancient Egypt was actually gathered from hieroglyphics. They have been discovered on the walls of ancient buildings, on tablets, and on **artifacts** such as bits of pottery. Once archaeologists were able to read hieroglyphics, they could solve some of the mysteries of this ancient civilization.

The Nile River provided the tools that scribes used to write their everyday messages as well as the messages that would last for thousands of years. Tablets made from river mud were first used to record hieroglyphics. Later, they used papyrus, a paper-like material made from the papyrus plant. This plant was **abundant** on the banks of the Nile.





To make this paper, the papyrus plant was harvested by laborers. They cut down the stalks, which can grow to be ten feet long, and sliced them into thin strips. Then they soaked the stalks in water for a few days.

Once the water had softened the papyrus stalks, the laborers placed the strips on the ground and pounded them until most of the water drained away. The workers then arranged the strips into large sheets and placed them under boulders. The heavy weight caused the papyrus strips to bond together as they slowly dried out.

Since most people could not read, scribes acted as messengers as well. They would read a royal decree aloud so that citizens could learn about new laws and other decisions made by their pharaoh. This was one important way in which the pharaoh communicated with his subjects and kept them informed.



Papyrus was used for writing and for creating images like this one of a mummy and a spirit.



The Nile River was considered the source of life for the ancient Egyptians.



## Ancient Egyptian Beliefs

Life for the Egyptians focused on the Nile River, which they believed was at the geographic center of the Earth. They believed that the Earth was flat. They had no way to know otherwise. They didn't have rugged ships that could sail through the rough waves of the oceans, where explorers might discover distant lands that existed beyond their horizon.

The Egyptian people thought that the Earth had started out as mud. They believed that their gods pushed up a mound of solid land called Egypt. The people of Egypt honored their gods for creating their land and the Nile.





Priests and priestesses were responsible for honoring and caring for the gods.



Egyptian priests and priestesses were responsible for making sure that the gods and goddesses were happy. These people were very powerful. If a pharaoh selected a man to become a priest or a woman to become a priestess, then the position would be passed on within the family from generation to generation. A father or mother would pass on the title to a son or daughter. From a young age, the chosen child served under his or her parent and learned the proper rituals and behavior.

All priests followed a strict code of conduct. They kept their bodies clean and pure by taking baths each day in sacred pools. They shaved their heads. They didn't want any of the filth of Earth to pollute their skin or their minds. After all, they were responsible for watching over the spiritual health of the people.

The priests and priestesses organized festivals, took care of the temples, and performed the rituals that marked each important stage of life. The people expected the priests and priestesses to be honorable and to please the gods and goddesses.

To hold their festivals and rituals, the ancient Egyptians built large temples along the Nile. The royal architects designed and supervised the creation of large building projects. Architects also designed the pyramids, which were enormous stone and clay tombs that honored each pharaoh and his family.



Archaeologists believe that the laborers, working under the hot sun for many years, slowly pushed gigantic stones up dirt ramps that were constructed along the walls of the pyramid, until they worked the last stone into place at the top.

The pyramids were so large that it took years to complete just one. The Great Pyramid at Giza is almost five hundred feet tall and covers nearly thirteen acres of land.

Architects and craftsmen also built the Great Sphinx. It was created out of a natural rock formation. Sculptors chiseled the sandstone and slowly shaped it into the head of a pharaoh. Archaeologists are still not sure which pharaoh the Great Sphinx is supposed to represent. The figure wears an ornate headdress and has the body of a lion.

The Great Sphinx is just one of many large structures built by the ancient Egyptians.







Anubis, the god of the dead (at left), stands by at a funeral.



The importance of the Nile carried over into the ancient Egyptian beliefs about the afterlife as well. The Egyptians believed that they should bury their dead on the western side of the great river. The sun set in the west, and they compared the setting sun, which brought an end to the day, to the end of life in this world.

For them, death was a transition. It was a temporary time that signified the end of life in this world and the beginning of life in another world. Because of their belief in an afterlife, the Egyptians took excellent care of their dead. If the dead were mistreated, the Egyptians believed that the spirits of the departed would make life miserable for the relatives who were still alive.

At someone's death, priests took the body and prepared it for its next life. The Egyptians believed that the spirit had already begun its journey to the next world. A priest had to preserve the body. That way, when the body followed the spirit, it would recognize the body and the two would be reunited.



Priests cleaned the body and carefully prepared it for burial. It took forty days to prepare the body. It was then wrapped with strips of linen. Inside the linen wrapping, priests placed amulets and other small treasures to protect the dead person on his or her journey to the afterlife.

The priests covered every inch of the skin with layers of linen to turn the deceased person into a mummy. Then they placed the mummy inside a coffin, which was often carved to look like the deceased.

The family presented the priests with some clothing, food, and other objects that they believed their relative needed for the journey. They wanted the deceased to live well in the hereafter. Some Egyptians asked the priests to include a miniature papyrus boat among the possessions. They believed that their relative would use the small boat to sail on the Nile River to the underworld, where this person would stay for **eternity**.

Bodies of the dead were wrapped in linen and stored in coffins.



A funeral barge transported the dead to the afterlife.







## The Nile Floods

The Egyptians worshipped the god of the Nile River, Hapi. The river also had a strong influence on their economy. They thought of the river as their refuge from the desert that stretched in every direction. The ancient Egyptian civilization prospered because the Egyptians learned how to live in harmony with the powerful river, which cut through the center of their land.

Egypt receives very little rainfall, so the river water was extremely valuable. But the Nile River was a complicated neighbor. For much of the year it flowed calmly along its northerly course. But after the end of the summer harvest, heavy rains normally fell to the south of the Egyptian kingdom.

The rain-swollen Nile began to rush along its course through the land of ancient Egypt. Eventually, the water spilled over the banks of the river. Floodwaters rushed into the lowlands and covered everything in their path. Because of this seasonal flood, which the Egyptians called the Inundation, the people knew that they needed to build their homes on the highest land in their kingdom. The high elevation usually protected them from the destruction of the late summer flood.



The Egyptians welcomed the Inundation. The floodwaters deposited rich silt from the river onto the dry land. Once the waters **receded**, the silt was exposed and could be used for farming. At other times during the year, farmers had to build canals to get water from the river to their crops.

But sometimes the summer weather and the river didn't cooperate. At times too little summer rain fell to the south. The Nile failed to flow over its banks and saturate the surrounding land. It was difficult to irrigate the newly planted crops. The land dried out and the crops failed.

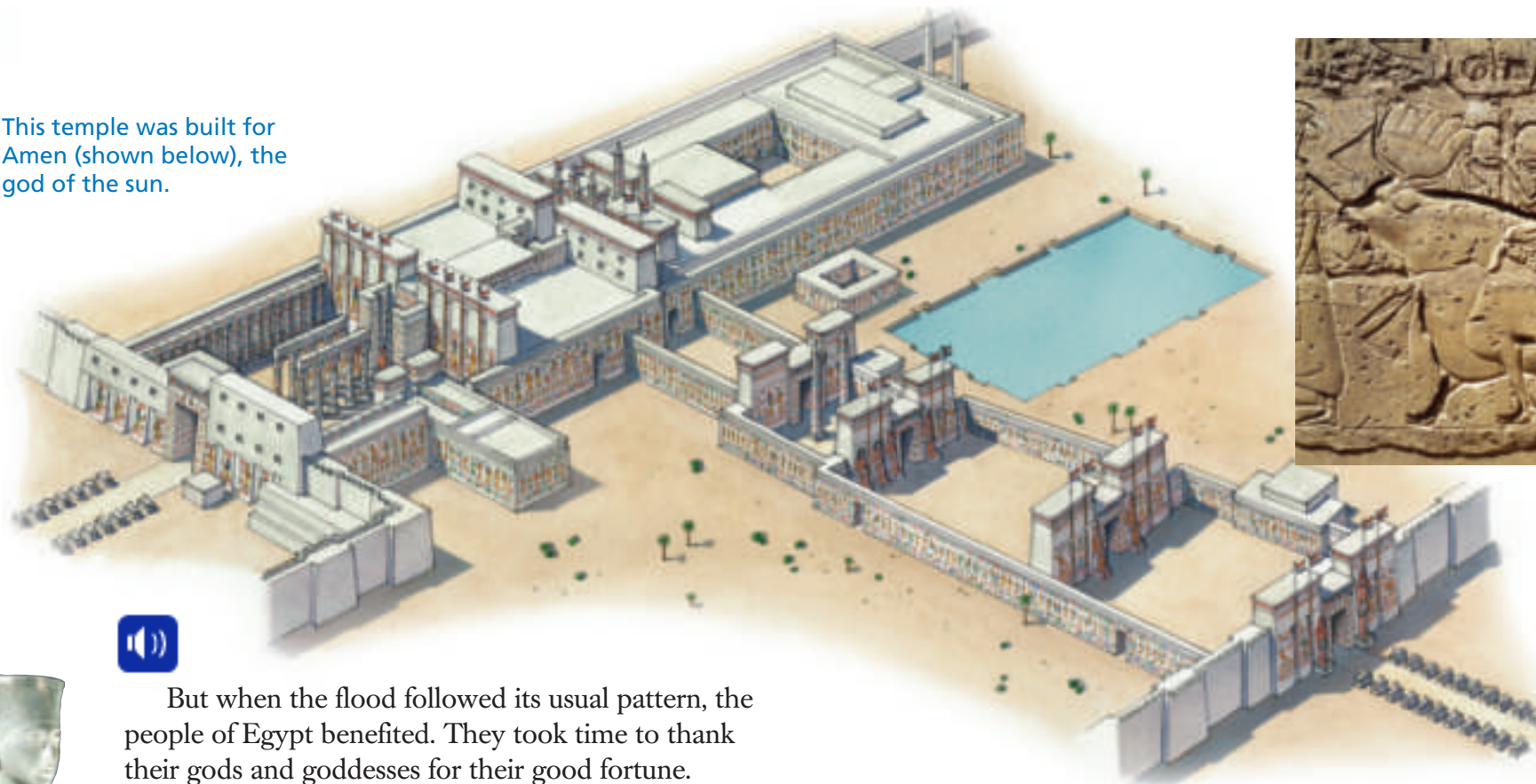
Sometimes there was too much rain in the summer, and the floodwaters caused terrible destruction. Raging waters washed away homes that were made of hardened clay. The structures simply crumbled and disappeared. Valuable orchards, which took years to establish in the soil, toppled over like flimsy matchsticks.

This picture, taken in the late 1800s, shows the seasonal flooding of the Nile River.





This temple was built for Amen (shown below), the god of the sun.



This carving shows animals being offered to the god Amen at the festival of Opet.



But when the flood followed its usual pattern, the people of Egypt benefited. They took time to thank their gods and goddesses for their good fortune. During the summer flood, the Egyptians held festivals to honor their gods.

One important festival was the festival of Opet. It honored Amen, the primary sun god, as well as Opet, Mut, and Khons. The festival went on for many days. This was an ideal time for a celebration since people could do very little work. The waters from the Nile River had filled their fields.

People flocked to the city of Karnak to attend the festival, which focused on a colorful procession. Priests removed the statues of the sacred gods from their temples, which were off-limits to common people. The priests put them inside a small shrine and placed the shrine on a small boat attached to poles.



The priests balanced the poles on their shoulders. They slowly made their way through narrow streets to a second temple more than a mile away. The people followed close behind. Acrobats thrilled the people with their stunts. Musicians and singers played and sang along the way. The shrine was held high in the air for everyone to see.

When the priests reached the doors that led into the second temple, the pharaoh greeted the sacred statues. People danced. Drums rolled. The priests and the pharaoh took the small shrine with its statues inside the temple, where the pharaoh received divine blessings from the god Amen. Sometimes this entire journey and festival procession took place on boats that floated on the Nile between these two temples.







## Farming Along the Nile

When the floodwaters receded from the lowlands, they replenished the farmland by leaving behind a rich coat of silt, or topsoil. This black soil was filled with nutrients such as nitrogen, which enriched the soil. The receding waters signaled the start of the annual season of rebirth and renewal. This was the time for farmers to go into their fields and plant their crops for the next year.

Planting conditions after the flood were perfect. The sun shone brightly, which was necessary for the growth of healthy, strong plants. Many inches of the soil, including the fertile top layer, were extremely muddy from the flood.

The mud made it easier for the farmers to plant their seeds. They didn't have to work a hoe through hard land or struggle to turn over their soil. They didn't have to water their fields once they planted their seeds. The flood did these chores for the farmers.

The farmers grew a wide variety of crops. They planted grains such as barley and wheat. They planted vegetables such as beans, chickpeas, cucumbers, lettuce, and onions. On higher land, the Egyptians created vineyards and orchards. The trees bore fruits such as pomegranates, figs, and dates. The farmers planted gardens of herbs and spices such as dill, thyme, sage, and cumin to flavor their food.



Many ancient Egyptians were farmers or herders.



Many animals were drawn to the Nile River, where they took refuge under the shade of palm trees and drank from the river. Ducks and geese waddled along the riverbanks or swam in the water. Fish, crocodiles, and hippopotamuses also made the river their home. All these creatures were hunted by the Egyptians.

Only the upper class and royalty could afford meals that included meat. The lower classes usually ate vegetarian meals, which they enjoyed with homemade bread. They spiced up their dishes with dill and cumin or sweetened them with honey. They also ate watermelon, grapes, figs, and dates.







The floodwaters also helped the Egyptians devise irrigation systems, which were important along the Nile River. The crops and orchards received plenty of sunlight, but they also needed a lot of water to produce an abundant harvest. The people needed water for drinking and bathing.

The Egyptians took advantage of natural **levees** created by rocks, dead trees, and debris from abandoned settlements. These objects were tossed into piles by the raging floodwaters. Once the water showed signs of receding, laborers ventured into the mud and propped up the piles to create sidewalls. They built the walls into networks of ditches and simple canals that trapped the water. Farmers used the trapped water to irrigate their crops. Other people used the water for their needs during the drier months.

The farmers also built their own canals to irrigate crops. These were especially important for their orchards and smaller gardens. As time went on, the irrigation systems became more complicated. The ancient Egyptians did their best to keep water flowing to their fields. Their hard work created large harvests that made Egypt a very rich kingdom.

These are the flowers of flax plants.



Many farmers and their families grew flax, which was used to produce linen. Linen was used to make clothing. This important plant was harvested while it was still blooming. Children piled the plants high on their heads. Adults with big bundles stacked in their arms carried the valuable plants from the fields to a flat area where the flax could dry out in the sun. Then women spun the fibers of the flax into thread that was woven into linen.



Ancient flax cord





Clothing was simple and made of linen.

## Egyptian Fashion

Clothing in ancient Egypt was relatively simple and functional. Upper-class men usually wore short white skirts, or kilts. Older men wore long comfortable robes that swept down to their ankles.

Upper-class women dressed in close-fitting robes. Sometimes they added a cape-style cloak over their shoulders in the evenings, or if there was a rare cool breeze. The women's hair, jewelry, and elaborate makeup, which was especially dramatic around their eyes, held everyone's attention, not their clothing.

Lower-class men and women wore kilts made of a rougher linen. They were usually midcalf length. This simple attire provided comfort and ease of movement when they worked in the heat or in the fields. Children also wore very simple kilts as they worked beside their parents.



Both sexes cared deeply about their appearance, especially members of the upper class. After they bathed, they dabbed on fragrant oils and creams to protect their skin from the dry heat.

Wealthy men and women spent a good deal of time grooming their hair. They rubbed it with wax from beehives, which held the style and made the hair shine. Many wealthy men and women, including the pharaohs, wore dark wigs designed in elaborate hairstyles.

The people of ancient Egypt loved jewelry. Men and women wore stone-studded metal collars and necklaces that draped down their necks. They wore wide cuffs of bronze, gold, and precious stones around their upper arms, wrists, and ankles. Their fingers sparkled with rings. So did their toes, which would peek out of their leather sandals.

For many centuries the Egyptians retained their customs, from their style of clothing to their religious beliefs. Their kingdom flourished along the Nile River. And for a long time, their civilization prospered.



Egyptians used combs and other objects to be fashionable.





# Glossary

**abundant** *adj.* more than enough; very plentiful.

**artifacts** *n.* any items made by human skill or work, especially tools or weapons.

**decrees** *n.* decisions ordered by authority; laws.

**eternity** *n.* all time; an endless time period.

**immortal** *adj.* living forever, never dying, everlasting.

**levees** *n.* high banks built to keep a river from overflowing.

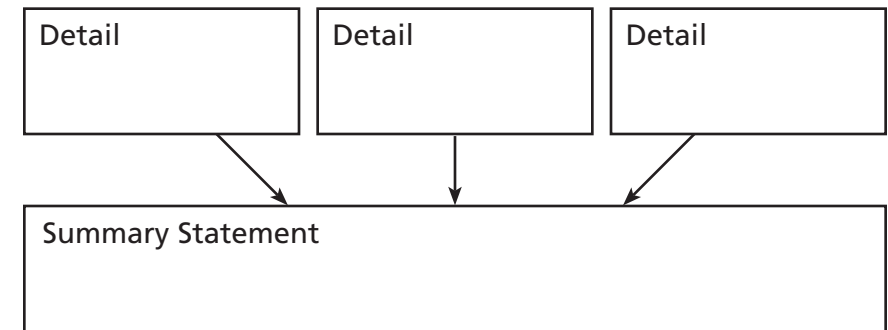
**receded** *v.* moved backward, withdrew.

**reigned** *v.* ruled over, as a monarch rules over a nation.



# Reader Response

1. How do the modern photos in this book help you understand life in ancient Egypt? Choose one photograph as an example and explain its connection to the ancient Egyptians.
2. Think about the book you just read. Summarize what the book is about. Use a graphic organizer like this one to help you write a summary statement.



3. On a separate sheet of paper, write two words or phrases that are antonyms of *abundant* and *immortal*. Use each word in a sentence.
4. If it were possible, would you like to visit ancient Egypt for a week? Explain your answer.

