

Nile River

Introduction

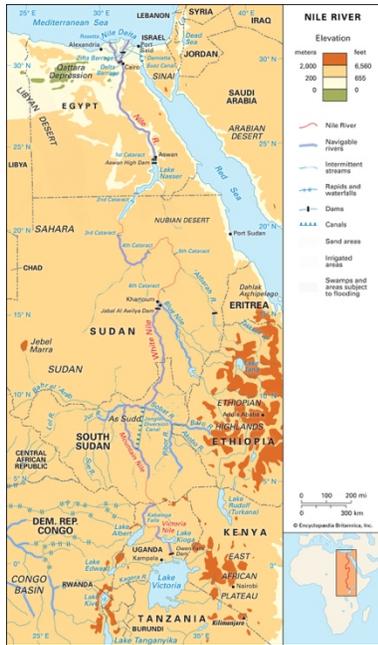


Figure 1: The Nile River basin provides drainage for much of Africa. Construction of the Aswan High Dam made year-round irrigation of the Nile Basin possible.

The longest river in Africa, the Nile at 4,132 miles (6,650 kilometers) is also the longest river in the world. Known in Arabic as Al-Bahr or Bahr al-Nil, it rises just south of the Equator in eastern Africa and flows in a generally northward direction to drain into the Mediterranean Sea.

The Nile's southernmost source is the Kagera River in Burundi, which empties into Lake Victoria. From Lake Victoria the river flows through Uganda to South Sudan, where the main branch is known as the Mountain Nile. It flows through the vast swamps of Al-Sudd in South Sudan and then for the next 500 miles (800 kilometers) is known as the White Nile. The Blue Nile, the largest tributary, joins the White Nile near Khartoum, Sudan. From Khartoum to Aswan, Egypt, the combined White and Blue Nile are known as the United Nile or simply as the Nile River. Its last major tributary, the Atbara River, joins it about 200 miles (320 kilometers) north of Khartoum. Farther north the Nile flows in a broad S-bend through the arid Nubian Desert and descends in six cataracts, or waterfalls, before it enters Lake Nasser near the Egypt-Sudan border. As the Nile approaches the Mediterranean Sea north of Cairo, it fans into a broad delta and branches into two major channels—Rosetta on the west and Damietta on the east. An extensive network of irrigation canals crisscrosses the delta.

The Nile River Basin

Covering about one tenth of the total land area of Africa, the Nile River's drainage basin extends to more than 1,293,000 square miles (3,349,000 square kilometers). It is bordered roughly by the Red Sea and the Ethiopian Highlands on the east, the East African Plateau on the south, the Marrah Mountains of Sudan and the Libyan Desert on the west, and the Mediterranean on the north.

Tropical rainforests of coffee shrubs and bamboo, banana, ebony, and rubber trees are found in southwestern Ethiopia and the East African Plateau. Savanna grasslands extend along the Blue Nile. The swampy Al-Sudd region abounds with

papyrus, a reed used since ancient times for making paper. From Khartoum northward there is true desert. Vegetation consists of only a few stunted shrubs except in the heavily irrigated Nile Valley in Egypt.

Many varieties of fishes are found in the Nile system. Among them are the Nile perch, which sometimes attains a weight of more than 175 pounds (80 kilograms), catfish, eel, lungfish, mudfish, and tiger fish. Common reptiles are the Nile crocodile, soft-shelled turtle, lizard, and some 15 species of venomous snakes. The hippopotamus inhabits Al-Sudd. Harmful insects such as the tsetse fly are found in the Upper Nile Basin.

The population density in the well-irrigated parts is more than 1,000 persons per square mile (386 per square kilometer). Peasant farmers—raising beans, corn (maize), cotton, millet, rice, and wheat—form the largest group. Almost three fourths of the total area irrigated by the Nile is in Egypt. While almost 95 percent of Egypt's population live in the Nile Valley and Delta, the area makes up only about 5 percent of Egypt's land.

Modern irrigation in the Nile Valley started with the completion of a delta barrage scheme in 1861. There is now a series of dams between Lake Victoria and the Mediterranean that holds water in reserve until needed for irrigation. The Aswan High Dam, 500 miles (800 kilometers) south of Cairo, was constructed between 1960 and 1970. Lake Nasser, the reservoir formed by the dam, is the largest man-made lake in the world at 1,930 square miles (5,000 square kilometers). The dam altered the environment of the Nile Basin by making possible irrigation on a year-round basis. It also provides electricity and protection against severe floods in Egypt and Sudan. The Owen Falls Dam at Lake Victoria, one of the largest hydroelectric developments in Africa, provides power for industries in East Africa.



Figure 2: The Nile River flows through Juba, South Sudan.



Figure 3: Lake Nasser was created by the impounding of the Nile's waters by the Aswan High Dam.



Figure 4: A village sits along the White Nile River, in the swampy Al-Sudd region of South Sudan.

History



Figure 5: A papyrus painting from ancient Egypt shows a boat traveling on the Nile River.

The Egyptian civilization, one of the oldest in the world, flourished in the Nile Valley after about 3000 B.C. Ancient Egyptians associated the river with the worship of gods and the prosperity of the land and life itself. The Nile is mentioned in Greek and Roman historical accounts dating back to about 457 B.C. In Homer's *Odyssey* (7th century B.C.) both the Nile and Egypt are known as Aigyptos. Several attempts were made to explore the Nile from the 17th century onward by Spanish, Scottish, and English explorers. Exploration and mapping of the origins and course of the Nile continued over the years.

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