

*History*  
UNFOLDING

# ANCIENT EGYPT



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**MindSparks**  
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	.....	2
<b>Lesson 1</b>	The Nile .....	4
<b>Lesson 2</b>	The World of Work .....	8
<b>Lesson 3</b>	Society and Government .....	12
<b>Lesson 4</b>	This World and the Next .....	16
<b>Appendix</b>	Image Close-ups .....	21

# Introduction

## The Civilization of Ancient Egypt

More than 5000 years ago, a remarkable civilization arose on the banks of the Nile and in the Nile Delta in the northeastern part of Africa. The first remarkable thing about this civilization was the magnificence of its art, architecture, religion, science, and other accomplishments. From the pyramids to the tomb of Tutankhamun, from its written hieroglyphics to its rich and subtle religious mythology, ancient Egyptian civilization soared to amazing heights. Even today, its achievements are still breathtaking.

The second remarkable thing about ancient Egypt was its stability and incredible durability. It rose rapidly to greatness in its arts and sciences. And then it seemed to reproduce itself with little change, century after century. Of course, it is easy to exaggerate this stability by focusing on the broad course of a long 3000-year history. There were, after all, periods of war and civil war, empire and invasion. But if you compare, say, the art of the Old Kingdom (2600–2180 BCE) with that of the New Kingdom (1570–1075 BCE), the similarities far outweigh the differences. Year after year, life seemed to many in ancient Egypt to be unchanging.

The 12 illustrations in this booklet focus on several factors that may help account for these two features of ancient Egypt: its accomplishments and its solid, almost self-satisfied stability. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **The Nile**

The central force in ancient Egypt was the huge river. Its annual floods kept the lands fertile, allowing the agricultural cycle to repeat itself century after century. The river, surrounded by deserts, united Egypt and kept it protected for much of its long history.

### **The World of Work**

The illustrations in this lesson focus on the farming base of ancient Egypt's economy, and on Egypt's ability to devote huge amounts of effort to the great construction projects for which it is famous.

### **Society and Government**

Egypt was able to build up its wealth and achieve its stability through the coordination provided by a strong central government. What gave that government its authority was a religion focused on the divine nature of its god-kings, the pharaohs.

### **This World and the Next**

Ancient Egypt's religion did not exist simply to justify the power of the pharaohs. All of ancient Egypt's life was soaked through and through with religious meaning. The stability and satisfactions of life in this world only made Egyptians more confident that life in the next would be the same. The illustrations in this lesson focus on a number of key aspects in the Egyptian conception of the afterlife and its role in this one.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Ancient Egypt***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand the crucial role the Nile played in the birth and the flowering of ancient Egyptian civilization.

# The Nile

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*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

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**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

The civilization of ancient Egypt arose over 5000 years ago. It grew from small farming villages located along the banks of the Nile River in northern Africa. And the Nile is first thing you need to know about to understand ancient Egypt. Most early civilizations grew up along big rivers. But the Nile was unusual in many ways. One major aspect of the Nile was its annual flood. This illustration shows the banks of the Nile after flood season, with the great pyramids of Giza nearby. A man here tends his animals much as ancient Egyptians would have. The Nile is about 4100 miles long. Each year, rains far to the south flood the river all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. The ancient Egyptians looked forward to these floods. That's because each year's flood left behind a new layer of rich soil. This meant the same lands could be farmed year after year, for many centuries—and they would never wear out.

**Illustration 2**

Along the Nile's banks, villages in ancient Egypt thrived. But not far from the rich soil watered by the Nile lay vast deserts. On either side of the big river, fertile land suddenly turns to desert. In some places, the desert is very close to the river (as in this photo). And usually, these desert lands stretch far away from the Nile for tens or hundreds of miles. The rich farmland along the river was able to feed many villages, and in time it came to support a huge civilization. Meanwhile, the deserts on either side were a natural barrier, protecting Egypt against attacks from enemies. For this reason, ancient Egypt was usually a safe and very comfortable world for the people living in it.

**Illustration 3**

The Nile also gave ancient Egypt a natural roadway. Villages could trade with one another easily up and down the river. Boats going downstream (north) floated with the current. Going upstream (south), they could use sails. Winds generally blew from the Mediterranean in a southerly direction, so it was fairly easy to sail up the Nile. After about 700 miles, boats would reach the first cataract, or set of rapids. It was harder to travel beyond the cataracts. But these also acted as barriers to anyone coming down the Nile to attack Egypt. This small model boat carrying a mummy was placed in a tomb around 1900 BCE.

## Lesson 1 – The Nile

# Illustration 1



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### ***Discussing the Illustration***

1. This photo shows the banks of a famous river with some very old pyramids in the background. What were the pyramids?
2. The Nile is over 4000 miles long. Ancient Egyptian civilization grew up along this huge river. What kinds of things do historians have in mind when they call a society a great civilization?
3. Many early civilizations grew up along big rivers. Why do you think this is so? How does this photo help to show the important role the Nile played in ancient Egyptian life?
4. This photo shows the Nile after its yearly flood. The flood season lasts from June to September. It is caused by spring rains high in Ethiopia's mountains. This yearly flood was probably the most important thing about the Nile to the ancient Egyptians. That's because of what the flood did to the land around the Nile. Can you explain what the flood did and why that was so important to the people of ancient Egypt?

### ***Follow-up Activities***

1. In some years, the Nile flood was much larger than normal. In other years, it was smaller. Make two lists. On one of them, list all the problems a farming village might face if the flood were larger than normal. On the other, list all the problems it would face if the flood were smaller than normal. Share these lists in a class discussion about this problem.
2. The rains in Ethiopia did not fall in ancient Egypt itself. For that reason, the Egyptians never knew for sure how large or how small the yearly flood would be. So how did they plan for the flood each year? Read your history textbook or other sources to find the answer to this question. Pretend you are an official in ancient Egypt. It is early July, and the flood season has just begun. Your job is to tell the farmers in your village what the flood will be like this year. Make a list of questions you think they will ask you about the flood. Then make a second list of the things you could do to find the answers to these questions. Share your list with the class.