# Introduction

The present volume of *A General History of Africa* deals with that long period of the continent's history extending from the end of the Neolithic era (Stone Age), that is, from around the eighth millennium before the Christian era to the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era.

That period, which covers some nine thousand years of Africa's history, has been roughly sub-divided into four major geographical zones:

(1) the corridor of the Nile, Egypt and Nubia (Chapters 1 to 12);
(2) the Ethiopian highlands (Chapters 13 to 16);
(3) that part of Africa often later called the Maghrib, and its Saharan hinterland (Chapters 17 to 20);
(4) the rest of Africa, including the African islands in the Indian Ocean (Chapters 21 to 29).

This division is largely determined by the present regional compartmental nature of research into African history. It might have seemed more logical to arrange the volume according to the continent's chief ecological divisions, which offer the same living conditions to the human groups inhabiting them, without any true physical barriers.

Such a division, more satisfying than the one that has had to be used, was unfortunately impossible. The separation into sections which is reflected in the plan adopted here derives very largely from the colonization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The archives of the history of Africa, which consist of reports of excavations or of texts and iconography, are for some regions assembled, classified and published according to an order which is irrelevant and arbitrary to the present situation in Africa, but which is very difficult to call in question.

This volume of *A General History of Africa*, perhaps even more than the one that preceded it, must depend on inconclusive and tentative assessments. This is because the period it covers is obscure, owing to the scarcity of sources in general, and of solidly-dated sources in particular – except in respect of certain relatively privileged regions such as the Nile Valley and the Maghrib. For the greater part of the continent, it must be repeated, hard verifiable facts in the period are exceptions rather than the rule.

Yet another point should be stressed: the archaeological sources available to the

historian are extremely inadequate. Because of the prohibitive costliness in men and money, excavations are not uniformly spread over the continent as a whole. There is not everywhere the density of excavation that is found notably along the coast, in the hinterland of the northern fringe and, above all, in the Nile Valley from the sea to the Second Cataract.

This lack of archaeological information cannot, unfortunately, be supplemented by reports of foreign travellers, contemporaries of the events or facts that concern this volume. The forbidding nature of the continent deterred outsiders. The continent's rugged nature, and its very size, discouraged, in antiquity as later, deep penetration by those from outside. It will be noted that, in the present state of our knowledge, Africa is the only continent where voyages around the coastline have thrown an important light on history.

These considerations notwithstanding, the inconclusive assessments of Africa from −8000 to +700 are not mere guesses or suppositions; they are based on available data, although these are often rare and inadequate. As should be expected, the task of contributors to this work has been to collect, weigh and assess those sources very carefully. As specialists in the regions whose history – no matter how fragmentary – they trace, they present here the synthesis of what may legitimately be deduced from the data at their disposal. Their assessments, subject to re-examination when further sources are available, will, we are persuaded, provide encouragement and research guidelines to future historians.

Some evaluation of the density of Africa's population during the crucial period between −8000 and −5000 is very necessary, because this is in fact the birth period of the cultures that were later to become differentiated. Moreover the demographic pattern of the period would have a bearing on the evolution of the art of writing: a high or low population density would encourage or make unnecessary the development of writing. The originality of Ancient Egypt, in contrast with the rest of Africa at the same period, perhaps, resides mainly in the fact that the high population density found in ancient times along the banks of the Nile between the First Cataract and the southern portion of the Delta gradually compelled the use of writing, simply in order to co-ordinate the irrigation system vital to these peoples' survival. In contrast, the use of writing was not essential south of the Aswan Cataract, which was a region of low population density where the small somatic groups who occupied the country remained independent of each other. Thus it is regrettable that the population density pattern during that period is beyond scientific investigation and certification.

Lastly ecology, which altered considerably both in space and in time, played an important part. The environment of −7000 to −2400, a period of 4,600 years, which is much more than half the period studied in this volume, was very different from that which obtained after the second half of the third millennium. This latter environment, which seems to have been very similar to the present, strongly determined the pattern of human societies living in it. Community life is not and cannot be the same in the great subtropical desert zones, southern as well as northern, as in the great equatorial forest; or in the mountain ranges as in the great river basins; or in the swamps as in the great lakes. The influence of these major ecological zones is of capital importance for the growth of the routes which permitted movement from one sphere

to another, for example, from the Maghrib or mountainous Ethiopia or the Nile Valley towards the central basins of the Congo, Niger and Senegal rivers; or again, from the Atlantic coast towards the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Yet those routes are still very little explored. They are guessed at or rather they are 'presumed', much more than actually known. A systematic archaeological study of them should teach us a great deal about the history of Africa. In fact, it is only when they have been discovered and fully investigated that we shall be able to undertake a fruitful study of the migrations between −8000 and −2500 which followed the last great climatic changes and which profoundly altered the distribution of human groups in Africa.

As may be seen, the chapters of Volume II of A *General History of Africa* constitute points of departures for future research much more than a rehearsal of well-established facts. Unfortunately, as has been stressed before, such facts are extremely rare except in the case of some regions that are very small in comparison with the immense size of the continent of Africa.

## *Egypt: geographical position*

In large part parallel to the shores of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, to which depressions perpendicular to its course give it access, the Nile Valley, south of the eighth parallel north and as far as the Mediterranean, is also wide open to the west, thanks to valleys starting in the Chad region, the Tibesti and the Ennedi and ending in its course. Lastly, the broad span of the Delta, the Libyan oases and the Suez isthmus give it wide access to the Mediterranean. Thus open to east and west, to south and north, the Nile Corridor is a zone of privileged contacts, not only between the African regions bordering it, but also with the more distant centres of ancient civilization of the Arabian peninsula, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean world, western as well as eastern.

However, the importance of this geographical position varied with time. In Africa the end of the Neolithic Age was characterized by a final wet phase that lasted till around −2300 in the northern hemisphere. During that period, which extended from the seventh to the third millennium before the Christian era, the regions east and west of the Nile enjoyed climatic conditions favourable to human settlement and, consequently, contacts and relations between the east and west of the continent were as important as those established between the north and the south.

In contrast, after −2400, the very drying-up of that part of Africa lying between the thirtieth and fifteenth parallels north made the Nile Valley the major route of communication between the continent's Mediterranean coast and what is now called Africa south of the Sahara. It was via the Nile Valley that raw materials, manufactured objects and, no doubt, ideas moved from north to south and vice versa.

It is clear that, because of climatic variations, the geographical position of the middle Nile Valley, as of Egypt, did not have the same importance, or more exactly the same impact, during the period from −7000 to −2400 as it did after that date. Between those years, human groups and cultures could move freely in the northern hemisphere between east and west as well as between south and north. This was the primordial period for the formation and individualization of African cultures.

From −2400 to the seventh century of the Christian era, however, the Nile Valley became the privileged route between the continent's north and south. It was via that valley that exchanges of various kinds took place between black Africa and the Mediterranean basin.

## *Sources for the history of the Nile Valley in antiquity*

The sources at our disposal are of an archaeological nature and thus silent – at least apparently – and literary. The former, especially for the earliest periods have only recently been sought out and collected together. The literary sources, on the other hand, have a long tradition.

Well before Jean-François Champollion (+1790 to +1832), who in the nineteenth century deciphered old Egyptian scripts, mysterious Egypt had aroused curiosity. As early as the sixth century before the Christian era the Greeks had already called attention to the differences between their customs and beliefs and those of the Nile Valley. Thanks to Herodotus, their observations have come down to us. To gain a better understanding of their new subjects, the Ptolemaic kings had a history of Pharaonic Egypt compiled on their own behalf in the third century before the Christian era. Manetho, an Egyptian, was put in charge of writing this general history of Egypt. He had access to the ancient archives and was able to read them. If his work had come down to us in its entirety, we would have been spared many uncertainties. Unfortunately it disappeared when the Library of Alexandria was burned. The excerpts preserved in various compilations, which were too often assembled for apologetic purposes, none the less provide us with a solid framework of Egyptian history. In fact, the thirty-one Manethonian dynasties remain today the firm foundation of the relative chronology of Egypt.

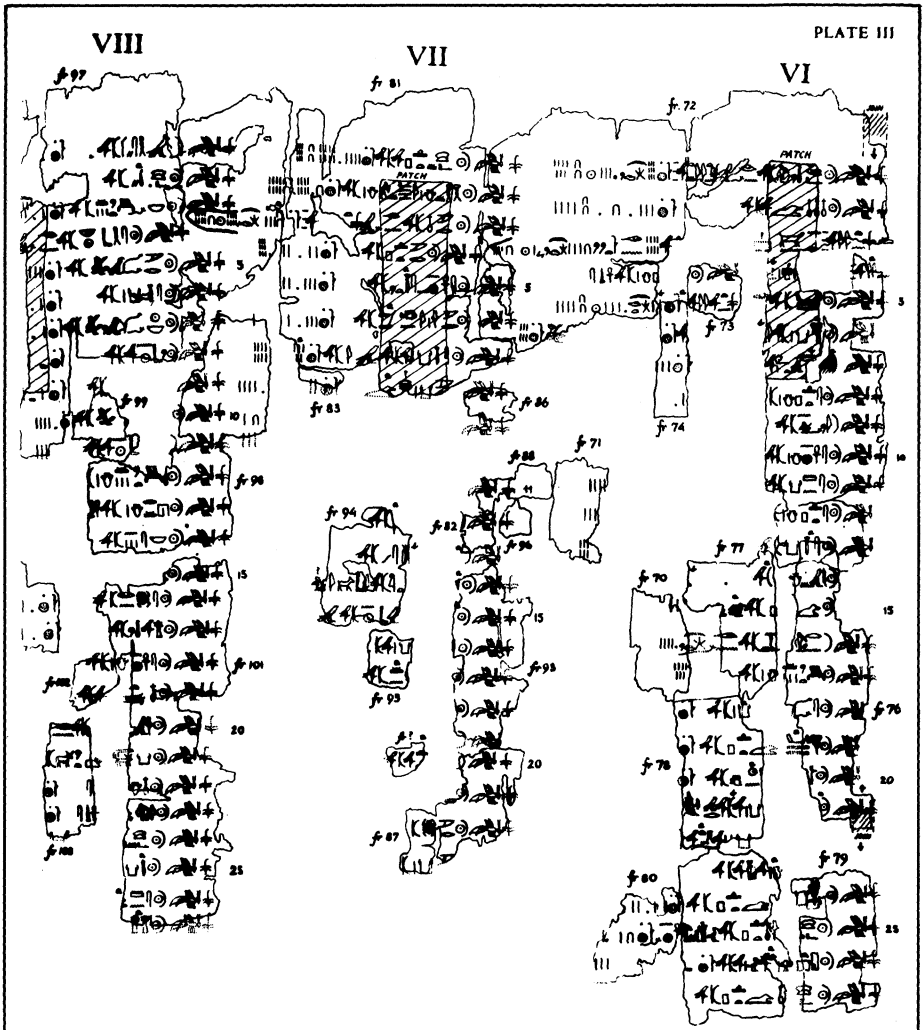
The closing of the last Egyptian temples under Justinian I in the sixth century of the Christian era led to the abandonment of Pharaonic forms of writing, whether hieroglyphic, hieratic or demotic. Only the spoken language survived, in Coptic; the written sources gradually fell into disuse. It was not until +1822, when Jean-François Champollion deciphered the script that we once again had access to ancient documents drawn up by the Egyptians themselves.

Of course these Ancient Egyptian literary sources have to be used with caution, for they are of a particular nature. Most often they were prepared with a specific purpose: to enumerate a Pharaoh's achievements or to ensure eternal worship. Into these two categories of documents fall the lengthy texts and historical images that adorn some parts of Egyptian temples, and also the venerable ancestor lists such as those carved in the Karnak temples during the Eighteenth Dynasty and at Abydos during the Nineteenth.

For compiling royal lists like those referred to above, the scribes used documents drawn up either by priests or by royal officals, which presupposes the existence of properly maintained official archives. Unfortunately only two of these documents have come down to us, but even they are incomplete. They are:

*The Palermo Stone* (so called because the largest fragment of the text is preserved in the museum of that Sicilian city) is a diorite slab carved on both faces, which preserves

*The Palermo Stone (A. H. Gardiner,* The Egypt of the Pharoahs, *Oxford University Press, 1961)*




*The Papyrus of Turin (A. H. Gardiner,* The Royal Canon of Turin, *Oxford, 1954. Photo, Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)*

for us the names of all the Pharaohs who reigned in Egypt from the beginning to the Fifth Dynasty, around −2450. Starting with the Third Dynasty, the Palermo Stone lists not only the names of the sovereigns in the order of their succession but also, year by year, the most important events of each reign.

*The Turin Papyrus*, preserved in that city's museum, is no less important, although it consists only of a list of rulers, with their complete protocol and the number of years, months and days of their reigns, arranged in chronological order. It provides a complete list of all the Pharaohs from the earliest times to around −1200.

## *Egyptian chronology*

The Palermo Stone, the Turin Papyrus and the royal lists on monuments are all the more important for the history of Egypt in that the Egyptians did not use any continuous or cyclical eras similar to our systems: such as, for example, before or after Christ, the years of the Hegira, or the Olympiads. Their computation was based on the person of the Pharaoh himself and each date was given by reference to the sovereign ruling at the time the document was drawn up. This practice explains the importance, for establishing chronology, of knowing both the names of all the Pharaohs who reigned and the duration of each one's reign. Not only does the order of succession itself remain controversial for certain periods, when the Turin Papyrus and Palermo Stone have no references, but even the exact length of reign of some sovereigns remains unknown. At best, we have only the earliest known date of a given Pharaoh, but his reign may have lasted long after the erection of the monument carrying that date.

Even with these gaps, all the dates provided by the sources at our disposal added together give a total of over 4,000 years. This is the long chronology accepted by the first Egyptologists until about +1900. It was then realized that such a time span was impossible, for further study of the texts and monuments showed, first, that at certain periods several Pharaohs reigned simultaneously and that there were thus parallel dynasties, and, secondly, that occasionally a Pharaoh took one of his sons as co-regent. Since each of the rulers dated his monuments according to his own reign, there was thus some overlapping, and by adding together the reigns of parallel dynasties and those of co-regents, with the reigns of the official sovereigns, one necessarily arrived at a total figure which was much too high.

It would probably have been impossible to solve this problem, if one peculiarity of the ancient Pharaonic calendar had not provided a sure chronological framework, by linking that calendar to a permanent astronomical phenomenon the tables for which were easy to establish. We are here referring to the rising of the star Sothis – our Sirius – co-ordinated with the rising of the sun, at a latitude of Heliopolis-Memphis. This is what is called the 'heliacal rising of Sothis', which was observed and noted in antiquity by the Egyptians. These observations supplied the 'Sothic' dates on which Egyptian chronology rests today.

At the outset the Egyptians, like most of the peoples of antiquity, seem to have used a lunar calendar, notably to set the dates of religious festivals. But alongside that

astronomical calendar they used another, a natural calendar based on the periodic repetition of an event that was all-important for their existence – the flood of the Nile.

In that calendar the first season of the year, called 'Akhet' in Egyptian, saw the beginning of the flood. For about four months the fields would become saturated with water. In the next season the land gradually coming out from the flood waters became ready for sowing. This was the season of Peret, literally 'coming out'. In the third and final season the Egyptians harvested and then stored the harvest. This was the season of Shemou.

Whatever their reasons, the Egyptians, by linking the beginning of the flood, and consequently the first day of the new year, with an astronomical phenomenon, have provided us with a means of setting positive reference points for their long history.

At the latitude of Memphis the very gentle beginning of the flood took place about the middle of July. Observation over a few years appears to have sufficed to show the Egyptians that the beginning of the flood recurred on average every 365 days. They thereupon divided their year of three empirical seasons into a year of twelve months of thirty days each. They then assigned four months to each of the seasons. By adding five additional days (in Egyptian the '5 *heryou renepet*', the five over – in addition to – the year), the scribes obtained a year of 365 days which was by far the best of all those adopted in antiquity. However, although very good, that year was not perfect. In fact, the earth completes its revolution around the sun, not in 365 days, but 365¼ days. Every four years the Egyptians' official year lagged one day behind the astronomical year, and it was only after 1,460 years – what is called a Sothic Period – that the three phenomena, sunrise, rise of Sothis and beginning of the flood occurred simultaneously on the first day of the official year.

This gradual lag between the two years had an important consequence: it enabled modern astronomers to determine when the Egyptians adopted their calendar, that date necessarily having to coincide with the beginning of a Sothic period.

By combining the astronomical dates with the relative dates provided by the sources at our disposal – the Turin Papyrus, the Palermo Stone, the dated monuments of various epochs – we have been able to reach a basic chronology, the most certain of all those of the ancient Orient. It sets the beginning of the history of Egypt at –3000.

The conquest by Alexander of Macedon in –332 marks the end of the history of Pharaonic Egypt and the beginning of the Hellenistic period (cf. Chapter 6).

## *The Nilotic environment*

It is perhaps useful to quote here a sentence written by Herodotus (II,35) at the end of his description of Egypt: 'Not only is the Egyptian climate peculiar to that country, and the Nile different in its behaviour from other rivers elsewhere, but the Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind.' Of course, when he wrote that sentence Herodotus was thinking only of the countries bordering on the Mediterranean. It is none the less true

that, of all the countries of Africa, Egypt is the one with the most distinctive environment. It owes this to the regime of the Nile. Without the river, Egypt would not exist. This has been said over and over again since Herodotus: it is a basic truth.

From the end of the Neolithic Age, around −3300 to −2400, north-western Africa, the Sahara included, enjoyed a relatively moist climatic system. At that period Egypt was not dependent solely on the Nile for its subsistence. The steppe still extended both east and west of the valley, providing cover for abundant game and favouring considerable cattle-raising. Agriculture was then still only one of the components of daily life, and cattle-raising – even hunting – played at least as important a role. A census of this basic wealth was made every two years. The scenes decorating the mastabas of the Old Kingdom from the end of the Fourth Dynasty to the Sixth Dynasty (−2500 to −2200) clearly show that cattle-raising occupied an essential place in Egyptian life at that time.

We may thus suspect that man's search for control of the river – the fundamental achievement of Egyptian civilization, which enabled it to flourish – was probably stimulated in the beginning not by the desire to make better use of the flood for agriculture, but more especially to prevent damage by the rising waters. It is sometimes forgotten that the overflowing of the Nile is not solely beneficial: it can bring disaster, and it was no doubt for themselves that the valley's inhabitants learned to build dykes and dams to shield their villages and to dig canals to dry out their fields. So they slowly acquired experience that became vital for them when the climate of Africa between the thirtieth and fifteenth parallels north gradually became as dry as it is today, transforming into absolute desert the immediate neighbourhood of the Nile Valley, both in Egypt and in Nubia. Thereafter, all life in the valley was strictly conditioned by the river's rise.

Using the dyke-building and canal-digging techniques which they had perfected over the centuries, the Egyptians little by little developed the system of irrigation by basins (hods), thus securing not only their survival in a climate increasingly desert-like, but even the possibility of expansion (see Chapters 4 and 8 below).

It is no exaggeration to say that this unique system of irrigation is at the very root of the development of Egyptian civilization. It explains how human ingenuity slowly managed to overcome great difficulties and succeeded in changing the valley's natural ecology.

By profoundly changing the conditions imposed upon him by nature, man played an essential part in the emergence and expansion of civilization in the Nile Valley. Egypt is not only a gift of the Nile; it is, above all, a creation of man.

## *The settlement of the Nile Valley*

As early as the Palaeolithic Era (Ice Age) man occupied, if not the actual valley, at least its immediate neighbourhood and notably the terraces overlooking it. Successions of wet and dry periods during the Palaeolithic and Neolithic Ages (see Volume I) inevitably changed the population density, first one way then the other, but the fact remains that, as far back in time as we can go, *homo sapiens* has always been living in Egypt.

To what race did he belong? Few anthropological problems have given rise to so much impassioned discussion. Yet this problem is not new. Already in +1874 there was argument about whether the Ancient Egyptians were 'white' or 'black'. A century later a Unesco-sponsored symposium in Cairo proved that the discussion was not, nor was likely soon to be, closed. Recently an anthropologist cast doubt upon the very possibility of finding positive means of determing the race to which a given skeleton belongs – at least as regards very ancient human remains, such as those from the Palaeolithic Era, for instance. The traditional criteria applied by physical anthropoligists – facial index, length of limbs, etc. – are no longer accepted by everyone today. Nevertheless, it is highly doubtful whether the inhabitants who introduced civilization into the Nile Valley ever belonged to one single, pure race. The very history of the peopling of the valley refutes such a possibility.

Man did not penetrate all at once into a valley that was empty or inhabited only by wild animals. He settled there gradually in the course of thousands of years, as the very density of the human groups or the variations in climate forced him to seek additional resources or greater security. Owing to its position at the north-eastern corner of the African continent, it was inevitable that the Nile Valley as a whole, and Egypt in particular, should become the terminal point for movements of people coming not only from Africa but also from the Middle East, not to mention more distant Europe. It is, therefore, not surprising that anthropologists should have believed they could discern, among the several very ancient Nilotic skeletons at their disposal, representatives of the Cro-Magnon race, Armenoids, negroids, leucoderms, etc., although these terms should only be accepted with caution. If an Egyptian race ever existed – and this is open to doubt – it was the result of mixtures whose basic elements varied in time as well as in space.

One fact remains, however, and that is the continued existence in Egypt, as in Nubia, of a certain physical type which it would be vain to call a race, since it varies slightly according to whether we are concerned with Lower or Upper Egypt. Darker in the south than in the north, it is in general darker than in the rest of the Mediterranean basin, including North Africa. The hair is black and curly and the face, rather round and hairless, is in the Old Kingdom sometimes adorned with a moustache. Relatively slim as a rule, it is the human type that frescoes, bas-reliefs and statues of the Pharaohs have made familiar to us.

This shows that in the Nile Valley we have to do with a human type, not a race, a type gradually brought into being as much by the habits and conditions of life peculiar to the valley as by the mixtures of which it is the product. It is more than probable that the African strain, black or light, is preponderant in the Ancient Egyptian, but in the present state of our knowledge it is impossible to say more.

## *Writing and environment*

Egypt was the first African country to make use of writing, if we judge from the employment in the hieroglyphic system of pictograms representing objects that had long ago ceased to be used. It is possible to set its invention at the Amratian period,

called also the Nagada I (see Volume I), that is, around −4000, if we follow the dates suggested by carbon 14 dating, at the beginning of the historic period. Thus it is one of the oldest known systems of writing. It developed very rapidly, since it appears already established on the Narmer palette, the first historic Egyptian monument, which can be dated at −3000. Moreover, the fauna and flora used in the signs are essentially African.

Egyptian writing is fundamentally pictographic, like many ancient types of writing, but, whereas in China and Mesopotamia, for example, the originally pictographic signs rapidly evolved towards abstract forms, Egypt remained faithful to its system till the end of its history.

But this system thus completed had several flaws. It necessarily utilized a greater number of signs – more than 400 ordinary ones are known – which could leave the reader perplexed as to how to read them. In addition, it was impossible at first sight to know whether a given sign was employed as a word-sign designating the object represented, or whether it was used as a phonetic sign. The Ancient Egyptians invented also what Egyptologists call phonetic complements. These consist of twenty-four word-signs each of which has only one consonant. The scribes gradually came to use them to indicate phonetic reading of the signs.

It is evident that these twenty-four simple signs in fact play the part of our letters, and that we have here in embryo the invention of the alphabet, since these signs express all the consonants of the Egyptian language and since Egyptian, like Arabic and Hebrew, does not write the vowels. Hence there was no word in the language that could not have been written simply by means of signs. However, the Egyptians never took the final step in this direction, and, far from employing only the simple, almost alphabetic signs alone they further complicated their writing system by bringing into it, in addition to the signs used phonetically and their phonetic complements, new purely ideographic signs. These signs were placed at the end of the words. They made it possible to classify those words into a given category at first sight. For example, verbs designating a physical action, such as 'to strike', 'to kill', were followed by the sign of a human arm holding a weapon.

With its intricate system of word-signs, plurisyllabic phonetic signs, phonetic complements and ideographic determinatives – a medley of signs, some to be pronounced and others not to be pronounced – hieroglyphic writing is complex, certainly, but it is also very evocative.

One of the forces presiding over the invention and development of hieroglyphic writing in the Nile Valley is undoubtedly to be found in the need for its inhabitants to act together in a concerted manner to combat the disasters periodically threatening them, among others the flooding of the Nile.

The political unification of Egypt by Menes around −3000 was bound to strengthen further the development of administration and, therefore, of writing. Moreover, because of the very fickleness of the flood, one of the central government's responsibilities was to stock as much food as possible in times of plenty, to palliate the shortages which might always occur at short notice. Consequently the leaders, in this case the Pharaoh, must know exactly what the country had available, so as to be able, in case of need, either to ration or to distribute the existing resources to the regions

most seriously affected by the famine. This was the basis of Egypt's economic organization and, in fact, of its very existence. It required on the material level a complex accounting system for incomings and outgoings, as regards both commodities and personnel, which explains the essential role devolving on the scribe in the civilization of Ancient Egypt.

The contrast between Egypt and the Nubian Nile Valley gives us a better understanding of the role of writing and the reasons for its existence in the emergence and development of the Egyptian civilization. South of the First Cataract we are in the presence of a population having the same composition as that of Upper Egypt. However, Nubia was always unwilling to accept the use of writing, although the permanent contacts which it maintained with the Egyptian valley could not have left it in ignorance of that use. The reason for this stage of affairs seems to reside in the difference in the way of life. On the one hand, we have a dense population that the requirements of irrigation and control of the river on which its very existence depends have closely bound into a hierachical society in which each individual plays a specific role in the country's development.

On the other hand, in Nubia we have a population that at the dawn of history possessed a material culture equal, if not superior, to that of Upper Egypt, but the population of which was divided into smaller groups spaced farther apart. Those groups were more independent and more mobile, because stock-raising required frequent moves and played at least as important a part in the economy as did agriculture, the latter very limited in a valley narrower than in Egypt. The Nubian peoples did not feel the need for writing. They were always to remain in the domain of oral tradition, only very occasionally using writing and then solely, it seems, for religious purposes, or when they were subject to a central monarchical type of government (see below, Chapters 10 and 11).

## *African Egypt – receptacle of influence*

Around –3700 a unification of the material culture in the two centres of civilization in the Nile Valley occurred. Or, to be more precise, the southern centre, while still maintaining its distinctive characteristics, partially adopted the culture of the northern centre. This penetration southward of the northern civilization is often associated, on the one hand, with the invention of writing and, on the other, with the appearance in Egypt of invaders more advanced than the autochthonous inhabitants.

As regards writing, we have seen earlier that a purely Nilotic, hence African origin not only is not excluded, but probably reflects the reality. However, the originality and the antiquity of the Egyptian civilization should not hide the fact that it was also a receptacle for many influences. Moreover, its geographical position predisposed it in this direction.

The relatively moist climate at the end of the Neolithic Era and throughout the pre-dynastic period, which saw the crystallization of civilization in Egypt, made the Arabian desert between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley permeable, so to speak. It was undoubtedly by that route that Mesopotamian influences, whose importance,

incidentally, may have been exaggerated, penetrated into Egypt. It would seem also, in spite of the lack of sufficient investigation, that some contacts existed between the population of the Libyan desert and those of the Nile Valley.

To the north, it seems that in very early times the links, by way of the isthmus of Suez between Egypt and the Syro-Palestinian corridor, were not as close as they were to become after the establishment of the Old Kingdom. However, there again, very ancient traces of contacts with Palestine are to be noted, and the Osiris myth may have risen out of relationships between the Deltaic centre of civilization and the wooded coast of Lebanon – relationships which would thus date back to extremely ancient times.

At first glance the ties with the south seem much clearer, but their importance is difficult to assess. From the fourth century before the Christian era, people south of the First Cataract (see Chapter 10 below) were in close contact with the lower Nile Valley. In the pre- and proto-dynastic eras exchanges between the two groups of peoples were numerous in pottery techniques and the manufacture of enamelled clay (Egyptian faience), use of the same pigments, use of similar weapons, the same belief in a life after death, related funerary rites. During these contacts the Egyptians must have had relations, direct or through intermediaries, with the people of more distant Africa, as may be deduced from the number of ivory and ebony objects that have been collected from the oldest Egyptian tombs. Even if we accept that the ecological boundary line of ebony was farther north than it is today, it was still very far from Lower Nubia, and this provides us with a precious piece of evidence of contacts between Africa south of the Sahara and Egypt. Apart from ivory and ebony, incense – which appears very early – and obsidian, both items foreign to the Nile Valley, could have been imported by the Egyptians. Through this trade, techniques and ideas would have passed the more easily from one area to the other in that, as we have seen, there was in the Egyptians a considerable African strain.

Thus, whichever way we turn, whether west or east, north or south, we see that Egypt received outside influences. However, these never profoundly affected the originality of the civilization that was gradually taking shape on the banks of the Nile, before in its turn influencing adjoining regions. To allow of an estimation of the part that outside influences may have played at the beginning of civilization in the Nile Valley, a good knowledge would be needed of the archaeology of the whole country in ancient times.

A very comprehensive knowledge is required for a profitable comparison of the archaeological material collected in Egypt with that provided by the neighbouring cultures, designed to bring to light importations or imitations, the sole tangible proof of large-scale contacts.

But, while the archaeology of the fourth millennium before the Christian era is fairly well known, both in Upper Egypt and in Lower Nubia (between the First and Second Cataracts), the same does not apply to the other parts of the Nile Valley. The Delta, in particular, is virtually unknown to us in respect of the pre- and proto-dynastic periods, except for some very rare localities on its desert fringe. All references to possible influences coming from Asia during those periods, by way of the Suez isthmus or the Mediterranean coast, are yet to be authenticated by investigation.

We encounter the same difficulties in the case of the upper Nile Valley, between the Second and Sixth Cataracts. Our ignorance of the earliest archaeology of this vast region is all the more regrettable, in that it must have been there that contacts and trade between the Egyptian part of the Nile Valley and Africa south of the Sahara took place.