

# Linear Statecraft along the Nile: Landscapes and the Political Phenomenology of Ancient Egypt

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## Abstract

States in archaeological and historical parlance generally are large and dynamic entities with continually fluctuating borders and boundaries across large land masses. States also are characterized by multiple nodes of settlement and multiple regions of resource availability within those large land masses, including agricultural fields, animal pastures, raw materials, and labor power. The northeastern African continent however provides a rather different spatial configuration for states' prerequisites of agricultural intensification and social integration: the ancient Egyptian state—and all subsequent political entities called “Egypt”—have been framed by the valley of the Nile as a long and narrow corridor of human viability. Using “flow” as a phenomenological concept in which experiences are heightened by restraint conditions, this article examines the characteristics of political and social cohesion given geographic limitations on communication, migration and territorial expansion. The constraints of a viable landmass surrounded by uninhabitable desert parallel the conditions experienced by island states, enabling the productive application of island and archipelagic models to the analysis of the ancient Egyptian state.

## Keywords

Egypt – island theory – state – landscape – phenomenology – Nile valley

## 1 Introduction

Ancient complex societies in Egypt have long been compared to other global traditions of statecraft including Mesopotamia, the Indus, China, the Maya

region, and the Inka and Roman Empires. Yet on what basis is it appropriate to evaluate the political configurations of the Nile valley with reference to these other areas? The question is of interest to scholars in history, political science and anthropology as they seek to understand the long-term trajectories of growth and change that have conditioned the emergence of the modern globalized world. Studying the development of ancient states provides an opportunity to analyze the inception of intangible concepts such as bureaucracy, nationalism and identity within a tangible integration of physical landscapes and human bodies. This material perspective is ideally suited for archaeological research, in both the literal and Foucauldian senses.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 6,000 years, human societies have intensified from simple villages to the creation of towns and cities. Political configurations have similarly intensified: the face-to-face interactions that sufficed for villages have become overlain with hierarchical bureaucracies that cover vast landscapes.<sup>2</sup> States are the most complex of these political configurations, created and experienced both as top-down entities (consisting of an administration that collects taxes, installs a countrywide territorial apparatus and provides a template of laws and customs) and as bottom-up entities in which the people who reside within a state's territory live in recognition of the existence of a political entity which they endorse, acknowledge or defy through their myriad daily actions.<sup>3</sup> The

1 In Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the author recounts that the history of ideas "is the discipline of beginnings and ends, the description of obscure continuities and returns, the reconstitution of developments in the linear form of history" (137).

2 There is a voluminous scholarly literature dedicated to the origins of the state; among the most-cited examples are: Carneiro, "A Theory of the Origin of the State"; Flannery "The Cultural Evolution of Civilizations"; Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society*; Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*; Service, *Primitive Social Organization*; and Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State*. Many of these sources also discuss the implications of the historical development of the state for the present day, to which can be added works that specifically focus on modern states such as Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. Despite the prevalence of the state in the modern world, and the clear evidence for state-level formations throughout recorded history, it is often difficult to understand why states developed at all given that they are labor-intensive, costly, and easily-fragmented entities; as Van De Mieroop notes, "When compared to other ancient cultures the creation of Egypt as a territorial state was a rapid process, requiring a few centuries only. Why it happened cannot be answered with confidence." (Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 36).

3 There are many ways to evaluate ordinary inhabitants' responses to the existence of the state. Acquiescence to the state involves real costs to those who are taxed, conscripted, or otherwise impressed into service, which makes it difficult to understand why ordinary people would tolerate such exploitation. Support for the state by those who are exploited can be derided as "false consciousness" as put forth by Marx and Engels (for a treatment of this concept, see Augustinos, "Ideology, False Consciousness, and Psychology"). On the other hand, ordinary people also exploit the state and its institutions through expectations of protection,

state, as an organic entity, is comprised of millions of individual actions, and any state has a life-cycle that includes an inception followed by attempts to unify the physical landscape through singular rubrics of political, economic, social (and sometimes religious) interactions.<sup>4</sup>

In states, as in any political formation, people use natural landscapes to connect and disconnect themselves from other people by making use of social contacts and technologies of transport that enable them (and their goods) to traverse water and terrain. Continental landmasses have been inscribed by the fluctuating borders of multiple states over time, while island and peninsular landmasses are sometimes combined into so-called archipelagic states reflecting both colonial and indigenous labors of cooperation.<sup>5</sup> States require a physically defined space of action and performance, and even if we wish to avoid geographic determinism it is clear that the shape of the physical landscape affects the potential strategies of state functionality.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, states' physical growth and fragmentation are the predominant characteristics of what constitutes their "history," expressed in narratives of maps, treaties, administrative decrees and tax-rolls and through the emotional investments represented by anthems, epic poetry and aphorisms of prosperity or loss.<sup>7</sup>

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food, legal redress against private grievances, wages for specialized services, and outsourcing of complex ritual for which apex leaders take the blame if rituals go wrong; Smith, *A Prehistory of Ordinary People* and "Urbanism and the Middle Class." Incompatibilities and misunderstandings are a chronic condition, in which the state bears the high cost of non-compliance through the cumulative effects of disapproving inhabitants' subtle acts of "foot dragging," pilfering, and "feigned ignorance" as described by Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, xvi. The realities of mutual exploitation within the state are succinctly discussed in Janusek and Kolata, "Top-Down or Bottom-Up."

- 4 Marcus, "The Archaeological Evidence for Social Evolution"; Feinman "Scale and Social Organization," although Feinman disagrees that a state should be thought of as an "organic" entity.
- 5 The concept of the "archipelagic state" has been developed in light of modern nations such as Indonesia, comprised of 17,508 islands (embassyofindonesia.org, accessed 14 July 2020; Lauder and Lauder, "Maritime Indonesia and the Archipelagic Outlook") and the Philippines, comprised of 7,641 islands (www.gov.ph, accessed 14 July 2020; Bautista, "Philippine Territorial Boundaries").
- 6 States acquire resources from selected parts of their territories, rather than covering all areas of a landscape with equal intensity of investment; see Smith, "Networks, Territories and the Cartography of Ancient States."
- 7 Documentation has been a mainstay of the state throughout history, in which the development of writing and record-keeping is part of the administrative apparatus. While ancient literacy was extremely limited, it does not mean that the use of words to characterize peoples' relationship to the state was similarly limited. Consider, for example, the memorable catch-phrase "a chicken in every pot," first attributed to the French king Henri IV in the sixteenth century and repeated in households for centuries; it was such a viable aphorism

Egypt is distinct from other state-level expressions of geographic cohesion in two ways that are directly implicated in the geography of northeastern Africa and the dependence of humans, plants and animals on the Nile. First, the lack of tributaries of the Nile starkly emphasizes the distinctive linearity of Egypt's one and only waterway (Figure 1). For the distance of 870 km stretching northwards from Elephantine to the area of ancient Memphis, the Nile has no feeder systems and only one branching outlet (to the Fayyum oasis); nor does the region have any other water bodies such as lakes.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, other riverine cultures such as those of Mesopotamia, the Indus region, and China, as well as the Mississippians of North America, were focused not only on the principal rivers themselves but also engaged with the many tributaries that fed water (and watercraft) into successively larger social, economic and political landscapes. The Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, Aztecs, and Vikings engaged with bodies of water such as lakes and seas that allowed for efficient and expansive contacts across large spaces. Still other ancient cultures, such as that of the Maya and Teotihuacan, made use of marshes for cultivation and water transport.

In addition to making use of linear watercourses and expansive water bodies, all of the above-mentioned groups were able to make use of gradations of topography and rainfall that stretched well into the surrounding landscape. In the Nile valley, however, even rainfall is scarce, meaning that the human interaction with water is one that comes almost exclusively through the physicality of the river itself. Where else can we seek parallels for state-level interactions in places of riverine limitations? The topography and landmass of the Egyptian state might be akin to the Andes region, in which there are numerous small parallel valleys each with their own mountain range that precludes the development of a single large river system. However, in the Andes there is still rainfall, and each valley developed a distinctive ancient culture that was sometimes—though not always—captured by political agents in adjacent valleys to result in multi-valley political groupings such as the Moche, the Chimú, and the Inka.

The second way in which the Nile valley is distinct is highlighted by the latter comparison with the Andes: there are no other adjacent valleys to the Nile that could support competing polities. The shore of the Red Sea is a minimum of 130 km away from the Nile with the harsh Eastern Desert in between; the next

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for good government and household prosperity that it was used as a selling-point of the U.S. Republican presidential campaign of 1928; Tabb, "A Chicken in Every Pot."

8 Bunbury, *The Nile and Ancient Egypt*, 4; Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*, 17. The Fayum as a Nile-fed depression constitutes the only exception to this linear configuration.



FIGURE 1 Bartholomew's Map of Egypt 1897, inset.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2009580103/>, ACCESSED 5 JULY 2020



viable watercourse to the west is found only in the present-day country of Mali, 3400 km away across the Sahara. As a result, the Nile valley was quite isolated to the east and west of its long linear territory, and surrounded by desert in a way that enhanced Egypt's isolation.<sup>9</sup> The sinuous, slender geographic profile of the Nilotic landscape means that rather than the territorial models of governance that have been assumed for nearly all other ancient civilizations, the understanding of Egyptian hegemony, political cohesion and social dynamics might be best compared to island geographies rather than terrestrial ones.

## 2 Islands and Island Ways of Being

An island is a land mass with distinct, bounded domains of viability for plants, fish, birds, mammals and insects. Conventionally defined as a point of solid, dry land surrounded by water, the concept of islands has more recently expanded to an understanding that an "island" environment is marked by stark ecotonal juxtapositions, resulting in the concept of "forest islands" within landmasses and "sky islands" as topographically isolated environments that harbor species that thrive only at those altitudes.<sup>10</sup> For biologists, islands are "microcosms for the analysis of ecological processes" because of the boundedness of the analytic unit; islands also have reduced populations and are often too small to support a diverse range of biota, particularly the largest apex predators.<sup>11</sup> Keeping in mind that the understanding of islands as an ideological concept is potentially fraught with nuances and critique about definitions and temporality, the identification of islands as having distinct physical qualities nonetheless has long provided a counterpoint to the physiology of continental-sized land masses.<sup>12</sup>

Islands' effects are not limited to biological viability. For humans, the stark contrast of an island with its surroundings provides an emotional and affective conceptualization of insularity that is woven through individuals' experiences of stark environmental distinction and the surrounding liminality of

9 For the practical effects of Egypt's physical isolation, see, *e.g.*, Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 10.

10 Rankin, "Tracing Archipelagic Connections"; for the concept of "sky islands," see McCormack, Huang, and Knowles, "Sky Islands."

11 Kirch, "Polynesian Prehistory," 39.

12 As with any classification scheme, the definition of an "island" is surprisingly complex and islands can appear and disappear through tidal and other actions; see Rankin, "Tracing Archipelagic Connections."

place.<sup>13</sup> Realizing visible land boundaries in multiple directions, the inhabitants of such landscapes have a compacted and bounded realm of psychological possession that is intensely “home-like,” and characterized by a theater of “miniaturisation and compression.”<sup>14</sup> These perceptions as a form of individual identity-making also are shared with others in the creation of an island culture that can be quite distinct from adjacent continental landmasses (often tellingly called “the mainland”), and even from other islands in the immediate vicinity. It is in this spirit that I examine the Egyptian state as an entity that grew within a bounded, island-like environment in most eras of its existence, with an occasional expansion into surrounding areas in ways that can be described as a peninsular or archipelagic configuration.<sup>15</sup>

The effects of natural environments and their cultural enhancements on human perceptions can be evaluated through a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology refers to a first-person perspective of experience in which humans engage with their physical surroundings in ways that result in a deeply intertwined experience of both emotions and physical objects.<sup>16</sup> Phenomenology can provide a means of identifying and analyzing everyday experiences within a natural environment; in the discipline of archaeology, the concept of phenomenology has been most frequently applied to Neolithic contexts rather than larger or more complex societal configurations.<sup>17</sup> However, the application of agentive, first-person perspectives is an important way of analyzing the rationale and impact of state formation. While the existence of the state is evident in both modern times and in historical contexts, researchers still do not agree why people developed states and other forms of social complexity.<sup>18</sup> An experiential perspective on the state may still not give us the

13 For example, Campbell “A World of Islands”; Rankin, “Tracing Archipelagic Connections.”

14 For the concept of “home-like,” see McMahon, “The Gilded Cage,” 197 cited in Rankin, “Tracing Archipelagic Connections,” 207; for the notion of miniaturization, see Rankin, “Tracing Archipelagic Connections,” 207.

15 The concept of the Egyptian oases as “islands” in a desert sea has been extensively treated by Ellen Morris, who also evaluates the role of islands as an ideological concept; see, e.g., Morris “Théorie insulaire et affordances des oasis du désert égyptien.”

16 The initial articulation of the concept of phenomenology can be traced to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s 1945 work, *Phenomenology of Perception*. A succinct explanation of the concept can be found in Carman’s 2012 “Foreword” to that volume.

17 Some of the more notable applications of phenomenology have been undertaken in Neolithic England (e.g. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*) and the prehistoric America Southwest (Van Dyke, “Visual Perception in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico”).

18 As noted above, Van De Mieroop muses over the rationale for the formation of the state in Egypt; similarly, Marcus (“The Archaeological Evidence for Social Evolution,” 261) notes that while the evidence of differential treatment abounds in the global archaeological record, “the reasons for such differential treatment are rarely self-evident.”

“why” of ancient states, but it does provide insights on how states functioned and how their existence produced palpable effects on the people who lived within the real or imagined boundaries of state authority.

The functioning of a state is not dependent merely on the physical features of a landscape but also on the ways in which those features are themselves agentic and whose use necessitates particular types of human action and reaction. Mountains, plains, valleys, glaciers, deserts and other distinctive entities have long anchored a sense of place through the distinction of their topographies.<sup>19</sup> Water features, whether in the form of natural rivers or human-made canals, comprise a distinct linear form that can, by turns, serve as connectors, boundaries, and barriers.<sup>20</sup> Linearity is accentuated not only by the length of rivers’ banks relative to their width, but also because rivers generally have unidirectional movement along a gradient. Rivers experience seasonal fluctuations of water through inundation and diminution, and can be characterized as living entities that also support entire ecosystems of other living things such as fish and waterbirds. The lifelike qualities of movement and growth mean that rivers are often personified, with an ascription of “personhood” that echoes even in the modern legal system.<sup>21</sup> The integration of a state with one or more rivers encompasses a sense of both dependence and risk, with rivers providing essential support for agriculture and trade while also subjecting riverside cities and fields to both predictable and unpredictable floods.<sup>22</sup>

### 3 The Phenomenology of the State

States are abstract concepts in which political power is invested in landscapes in ways that unite both ordinary inhabitants and political leaders through the creation of memory at points of geographic distinction.<sup>23</sup> Each state’s existence bespeaks a physical landscape that contributes to its functionality as an agricultural unit and as a basis for settlement in a way that is also promoted as

19 For mountains, see Sussman, “Regional Ways of Seeing: A Big-Data Approach for Measuring Ancient Visualscapes”; for valleys and plains, see Rockman “Landscape Learning in Relation to Evolutionary Theory.”

20 Salwen, *Barriers, Boundaries, and Byways*.

21 Hutchison and Abigail, “The Whanganui River as Legal Person.”

22 Smith and Mohanty, “Monsoons.”

23 Examples of the enhancement of natural topography include the emplacement of stone monuments at the source of the Tigris River by the Assyrian kings Tiglathpileser I (1114–1076 BCE) and Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE), see Harmanşah, “Source of the Tigris”; examples of the emplacement of anthropogenic topography include the construction of large-scale features such as reservoirs, see Kang, “Large-Scale Reservoir Construction.”



an ideological homeland.<sup>24</sup> The landscape of a state, and the punctuations of topography that comprise that landscape, also serve as galvanizing points of reference and identity.<sup>25</sup> State leaders highlight what they consider to be the best places for settlement, agriculture and resource procurement that will be reflected not only in prosperous communities but also in stable remunerations in the form of taxes on labor, goods, and other forms of wealth.<sup>26</sup> This perspective is heightened when the landscape is composed of heterogeneous pockets of arable land that require investments in transportation infrastructure, as seen most clearly in so-called “archipelagic states” that are composed of literal islands which can only be connected through technologies such as bridges and watercraft.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to sponsoring the construction and maintenance of infrastructure, states also manifest themselves through human creations designed to evoke an emotional response through monumental and symbolic architecture as well as through the governance of the spatial organization of domestic architecture, civic plazas and courtyards, infrastructure and other elements of the built environment.<sup>28</sup> Inhabitants also experience the effect of the state through various time-delimited and memory-laden ephemera of ritual including religious events, sports and acts of investiture and commemoration in

24 Indeed, Rankin (“Tracing Archipelagic Connections,” 2007) has suggested that “Imaginarities of hospitals, schools, prisons, nation states and clubs ... [have] aspects which overlap with the metaphorical island.”

25 Perhaps the most poignant example of natural topography as a focal point of contemporary state longing is Mt. Ararat, a mountain revered by the inhabitants of Armenia who can now only gaze at it across the Turkish border; Karakshian “Armenia.”

26 For a discussion of states’ absorption of different types of income such as physical labor taxes, taxes in comestibles that can be directly used to support bureaucracies and armies, and taxes in non-comestibles such as money that require a market mechanism of conversion, see D’Altroy and Earle, “Staple Finance, Wealth Finance, and Storage in the Inka Political Economy.” D’Altroy and Earle note that income is best conceptualized as “energy capture” (187) that is redirected from producers towards a bureaucratic hierarchy. Research elsewhere has demonstrated that this process is not, however, a simple result of state-level demands for material produce and labor but is intertwined with the growth of other socioeconomic configurations such as market mechanisms to which producers respond by shifting from the production of staples to the production of “cash crops” (Lentjes, “From Subsistence to Market Exchange”) and the powerful self-interest of other entities such as religious institutions who establish their own rubrics of production and extraction (*e.g.* Stein, “The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple”).

27 Lauder and Lauder, “Maritime Indonesia and the Archipelagic Outlook.”

28 For monumental architecture see DeMarrais, *et al.*, “Ideology, Materialization, and Power Strategies” and Porter, “The Importance of Place”; for domestic architecture see, *e.g.*, Acuto, “Landscapes of Inequality”; for walls see Smith “Networks, Territories and the Cartography of Ancient States.”

which ordinary people as well as elites contribute their energies through the presentation of offerings and the acts of dancing, singing, parading, or even mere silent attendance and witnessing.<sup>29</sup> The phenomenology of the state is thus not a process of static existence but results from sentient engagement with one's surroundings and with the materiality of the world that results in a process of continual "*becoming* over the long term," as observed by Gosden and Malafouris.<sup>30</sup>

The process of constant, interactive engagement also can be encompassed within the concept of "flow" as articulated by the philosopher Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi.<sup>31</sup> For Csikszentimihalyi, flow is a sustained and satisfying emotional state achieved when an individual is highly focused on a challenging task for which they have competence, such as a musician performing a piece of music or a surgeon engaged in the intricacies of an operation. Moreover, the achievement of "flow" is enhanced precisely through the existence of restraint conditions: games have rules, recipes have unilinear sequences of inputs, and craftmaking is a matter of skill applied to materials that can have variant properties including unforeseen weaknesses that must be addressed through the skill and expertise of the craftsman. As a result, "flow" can be attained by anyone who negotiates the restraint conditions of their surroundings to achieve a particular goal, including farmers, herders, fisherfolk, and traders who integrate their activities into the restraint conditions provided by nature.

The concept of a state adds a new layer of restraint conditions on top of the natural environment. In a state, with its rules for interaction and the governance over the uses of space, residents at all levels of the hierarchy from rulers to menial laborers have the opportunity to achieve an additional component of "flow" through the skillful practice of everyday life under expectations and restraints. But one could argue that the state itself is the result of an achievement of collective consensus through the repeated interactions under restraint conditions: there are boundaries (both conceptual and actual); factors of opportunity including agricultural productivity and warfare; and the management of centripetal forces of political cleavage and the disruptive forces of natural calamities. In a physical environment dominated by a particular kind of opportunity or constraint, the customs of a nascent state become intertwined with the physical surroundings that make survival possible, thereby adding cultural restraint conditions to natural ones. In Egypt, the stark landscape centered on the flowing Nile provided a distinctive bounded

29 For investiture and commemoration, see, e.g., Moore, *Cultural Landscapes*.

30 Gosden and Malafouris, "Process Archaeology (P-Arch)," 701.

31 Csikszentimihalyi, *Flow*.

physical environment that combined an island-like permutation of usable space with a “flow” of opportunity that was both literal and metaphorical.

#### 4 The Phenomenology of the Egyptian State

Ancient Egyptian history encompasses a well-known trajectory of inception, implementation and continuity from the celebrated unification of the Nile valley under a single leader c. 3100 BCE, to the successive political groupings known as the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2345, marked by the expression of monumentality in pyramids), the Middle Kingdom (c. 2055–1650, marked by literary fluorescence and the expression of monumentality in temples), and the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1069, marked by warfare and charismatic, expedition-minded leaders including Hatshepsut, Amenhotep II, and Rameses II).<sup>32</sup> In between the eras of Kingdoms came phases that have been described as times of political disaggregation (the First Intermediate between the Old and Middle Kingdoms; the Second Intermediate between the Middle and the New Kingdoms).

The Egyptian state configuration of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms, once viewed as a static entity with little fluctuation over time, has increasingly been viewed as a dynamic process.<sup>33</sup> Changes nonetheless took place within the same physical container of Egypt and often from the same nodal points of authority including the long-lived riverine settlements of Memphis in the north, Abydos at the mid-point, and Hierakonpolis and Thebes towards the south. The starkness of viability along the Nile, compared to the extreme hardships of the surrounding desert, has led scholars to characterize the Nile as a “long oasis,” a homogenous environment in which over centuries “the monarchy in ancient Egypt had relatively stable and well-defined borders” starting c. 3100 BCE.<sup>34</sup> Although Carneiro’s circumscription hypothesis applied to the beginning of state formation in Egypt may be overdrawn, it is clear that the exceptional stability of the Egyptian state relative to other complex societies may in part be linked to the clear delineation of arable land, the replenishment of soil fertility and the ease of transport afforded by the Nile.<sup>35</sup>

For Egypt, the concept of “flow” enables us to address the function of the river Nile, which served both as a distinct opportunity and as a restraint condition

32 Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*; Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*.

33 Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*, 12.

34 For the “long oasis,” see Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 7; for the stability of borders see Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*, 137.

35 Carneiro, “A Theory of the Origin of the State” as interrogated by Morris, “Ancient Egyptian Exceptionalism.”

that produced an intensification of culture: as Egyptians could only with great difficulty actually go beyond the Nile valley in any direction, the valley served as a natural barricade that freed leaders from endlessly contemplating expansion and conquest except in limited directions (and primarily in the directions that followed the Nile, whether to the south towards Nubia or to the north through the delta to the Mediterranean). The phenomenology of the state was linear for kings and queens, who could conceptualize their realm as a long, thin entity with few points of contact with outsiders. There were no competing states to the east or west across the desert, leaving only two external points of boundedness and consequent vulnerability: the First Cataract at Aswan, and the northernmost edge of the Nile delta where the river met the Mediterranean.

The two end-points of the realm can be examined in more detail to address the sense of geographic closure represented by the Nile valley. The idea of expansion to the south of Aswan was a component of the earliest state-level configuration, conducted by “‘acquaintances of the king’ ... [but] known only from the inscriptions they left in Nubia when they commanded great military expeditions around 2600–2500 BC.”<sup>36</sup> As suggested by the ephemeral evidence for the Egyptian presence, expansion to the south was largely symbolic and marked by military gestures such as inscriptions, or later, fortifications along an empty landscape. From the area of Aswan southwards, there was little arable land for another 600 km until one reaches the Third Cataract, resulting in a buffer zone that could only be crossed with considerable expenses of time and energy.<sup>37</sup>

The Nile delta, at the opposite end of the valley to the north, appears to have provided a greater environmental opportunity of contact with others. Yet this meeting point of the Mediterranean was an imprecise locale, given that the Nile did not debouche at a single place but was filtered and diffused along more than a hundred kilometer of marshes.<sup>38</sup> The complex hydrogeography confounded easy transportation and limited the availability of fresh water to such an extent that ports were located tens of kilometers inland from the coast.<sup>39</sup> Compared to the sharp physical delineation of the cataracts at the southern end of Egypt, it was the deltaic region that proved to be the most vulnerable area of the Egyptian state, as exemplified by the establishment of control by western Semitic speakers known as the Hyksos during the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1650–1550) and the group known as the “Sea

36 Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*, 69, citing Strudwick *Texts from the Pyramid Age*.

37 Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 8; Morris, “Ancient Egyptian Exceptionalism.”

38 Bunbury, *The Nile and Ancient Egypt*, 99.

39 Bietak, “Harbours and Coastal Military Bases in Egypt in the Second Millennium B.C.”

Peoples" who aligned with the Libyan chief Mereye against the Egyptian state in the thirteenth century BCE.<sup>40</sup> The delta was an opportunity for Egyptian state aggrandizement, but it was only after c. 1550 BCE that there was the first direct contact with foreign rulers and the development of a visible culture of organized warfare and repeated military campaigns.<sup>41</sup> This moment of expansion is one in which it could be said that the Egyptian polity became an externally archipelagic state, with physical implantations such as fortifications in the Levant. This expansion was a contested episode with significant local resistance, however, and after about 1130 BCE Egypt's presence in the Levant devolved back from a political one to a series of economic exchanges.<sup>42</sup>

The presence of the Nile and its physical buffer zones of the cataracts to the south and the delta to the north saved the state considerable amounts of resources given that fortifications were required only at the far ends of the polity, as there was nothing to guard against other than internal strife for the vast majority of the length of the state. The growth process of the state was also efficiently linear: the only direction for initial consolidation was either to the south or to the north of any given locale, starting with the original node of state-formation in the conjoined areas of Abydos, Naqada, and Hierakonpolis in Dynasty 0.<sup>43</sup> The kinds of decision-making that conditioned other states' expansions in terms of both opportunities and constraints provided by competing continental polities were not part of the political calculus in the Egyptian state, even if kings routinely proclaimed the dangers of encroachment at the

40 See Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, esp. chapter 6, "The Second Intermediate Period and the Hyksos (ca. 1700–1550)." For a discussion of the Nile delta region as a place of cultural encounter and fluid identities, see Candelora, "The Eastern Delta as a Middle Ground for Hyksos Identity Negotiation."

41 Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*, 55.

42 The area of the Levant had long been a source of raw materials, especially cedar and other woods desired by Egyptian rulers, and products such as oil and wine that were transported in jars of Levantine origin found by the hundreds in the Nile valley starting in the Predynastic Period (Ward, "Boatbuilding in Ancient Egypt"; Hartung "Interconnections between the Nile Valley and the Southern Levant"). Egyptian political expansion into the Levant during the New Kingdom did not occur as a simple linear imposition of Egyptian authority, however. Egyptian efforts of colonization, or perhaps more accurately "implantation," in the region were met by resistance at the local level by groups unwilling to devote tribute to the Egyptian state, but also by pressures from other powers who had their own designs on the region such as the Hurrians and the Hittites who backed up such local groups' insurrections (e.g., Burke, *et al.*, "Excavations of the New Kingdom Fortress in Jaffa, 2011–2014"; Morris, "Exchange, Extraction, and the Politics of Ideological Money Laundering.")

43 Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 35.

extreme north or south and that they had successfully vanquished those dangers through their military prowess.

Within its long and narrow confines, the Nile enabled political leaders and local inhabitants alike to use the river to efficiently acquire and distribute far-flung resources. For the uppermost elites, this included the stone utilized by the Old Kingdom builders from sources more than 800 km to the south of Giza and the pink granite from Aswan that was used to create sculptures and towering monolithic obelisks.<sup>44</sup> Provincial administrators and other officials owned property in different provinces starting in the Old Kingdom period, with an apparent ease of management and access that was made possible by the linear connection of the Nile.<sup>45</sup> The Nile transported goods for ordinary people as well, including grain and cattle, and served as the conduit by which they themselves moved from place to place, including as laborers for large-scale public works such as pyramid construction on the Giza plateau and mining in the Eastern Desert and the oases.

In addition to serving as a physical conduit for routine and ceremonial transportation, the Nile was a conduit for the psychological “flow” of Egyptian life in a way that recalls an island inhabitant’s differentiation of multiple realms. People internalized the Nile River valley, stretching from one harsh desert margin to the next, as the maximal expanse of the habitable world, just as an island-dweller could clearly discern the edges of the shore as a transition to the uninhabitable sea beyond. Starting c. 3100 BCE with the unification of the state up and down the river, the Nile also became, like the spine of a book, the central fixation and conduit of political authority. The Nile valley is no more than fifteen kilometers wide; unique among the territorial landmasses of ancient states, the inhabitants of ancient Egypt had the opportunity to see and experience the breadth—if not the length—of their state on a daily basis (Figure 2).

The resultant strongly linear physical phenomenon of the Egyptian state, as experienced by individuals at all levels of the socioeconomic spectrum, can be tied into linear orientations of path-making and identity that are particularly deeply engrained in the human psyche.<sup>46</sup> The unidirectional flow of the Nile from south to north provided a directionality of travel that perhaps not coincidentally led to the state’s most dramatic constructions near the point where the Nile branched out into the wider marshy realm of the delta. Roads

44 For stone, see Bunbury, *The Nile and Ancient Egypt*, 52.

45 For the concept of properties in different locales, see Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*, 83.

46 For the appeal of linear spaces as an organizing principle, see Prosssek, “Re-Designing the Metropolis,” 156; for the concept of path-making and path-walking as a linear engagement with the landscape, see Ingold and Vergunst, *Ways of Walking*.





FIGURE 2 Nile valley in Egypt (with the modern town of Asyut at center)  
GOOGLE EARTH 2020

and pathways were created from the Nile valley into the desert, but there was no need to duplicate the river itself, given that water transport was cheaper, faster and more efficient than land transportation. In a technological sense, the dependence on watercraft for trade and communication was another way in which life in ancient Egypt was very much like life on an island. And as in the case of an island, watercraft were an essential but also perception-enhancing technology: anyone on a boat could see the full extent of the Egyptian realm from one riverbank to another, with the habitable world coterminous with the outline of dry desert cliffs.

Within the “long oasis” of the Nile, the appearance of islands within the water had a distinct additional meaning. Judith Bunbury notes that islands in the Nile were important as foundation places of temples.<sup>47</sup> As a land mass within a watery surrounding, there was likely a conscious (or subconscious) appreciation for the nested symbolism of land within waters within land, in which an island within the Nile was a bounded microcosm within a bounded macrocosm. Moreover, the river was a living entity, as seen in texts such as the “Hymn to the Nile.” Known in multiple copies by the time of the Eighteenth Dynasty, the hymn was the celebration of the personification of the Nile in the form of the deity Hapy for whom there was a celebration in the manner of a

47 Bunbury, *The Nile and Ancient Egypt*, chapter 6.



FIGURE 3 Photograph of the landscape at the Nile shore with reed, water, sand, cattle, and date palms.  
ALAMY.COM RJBB8J

folk festival, with a public feast as well as singing, dancing, and processions.<sup>48</sup> Fredrik Hagen notes that the celebration of the Nile would have permeated the entirety of Egyptian culture, involving “all levels of society, up to and including the king.”<sup>49</sup>

The first-person experience of life in the ancient Egypt state was along a sliding scale of proximity and comprehension: the household, the Nile valley and the faraway state made manifest through the occasional visits of administrators and the occasional pilgrimages of individuals to work at royal sites such as pyramids and mortuary temples. The ability to see virtually the entire range of Egypt’s environment from any riverside village reinforced a sense of sameness that linked inhabitants across the political realm (Figure 3).<sup>50</sup> Ordinary people did not have to take the ruler’s word that the Egyptian state had marshes and

48 Hagen, “An Eighteenth Dynasty Writing Board,” 89.

49 Hagen, “An Eighteenth Dynasty Writing Board,” 90.

50 Moreno García (*The State in Ancient Egypt*, 15–18, 30) discusses how the areas all along the Nile were not a simple juxtaposition of water and land, but that the land itself was varied with bushland, marsh, and pasture interspersed with agricultural fields.



FIGURE 4 Hunting and fishing in the Nile from the tomb of Nebamun at Thebes, Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1350 BCE).

deserts and the river: the typical inhabitant of Egypt could see and appreciate all of the landforms that a ruler might describe (Figure 4).

Residents of the Egyptian state had additional quotidian reminders of identities that were inextricably tied to the physical landscapes in which they resided. There was a shared writing system, and a shared cuisine of land-based and water-based foods obtained from nearby surroundings. And there was the experience of the annual rising and falling of the Nile that supplied people



across the socioeconomic spectrum with shared memories of privations and abundances.<sup>51</sup> The realities of the Nile valley were not only a static parameter for life on any given day but also had a fluctuating calendrical regularity that introduced just enough vicissitude in annual life that there was a regular need for a mediating entity, perhaps one of the reasons why a state emerged at all.<sup>52</sup>

## 5 Discussion

The history of states is generally written from a political and economic perspective rather than an emotional or experiential one. The Egyptian state, occurring within the narrow confines of the Nile valley, provides the opportunity to expand our understanding of the state to encompass agentive perceptions of the landscape as well as interrogating the connectivities that created and sustained states through the intricacies of top-down and bottom-up actions. The recovery of diverse perspectives through archaeological and geographic assessments is especially important in Egypt, given the relative lack of textual and analytic emphasis on the ordinary people that comprised the Egyptian state over three millennia.<sup>53</sup>

For most inhabitants, the island-like qualities of the Egyptian state were encompassed not only by the physical buffers of the desert on nearly all sides but also the concentrated areas of environmental viability that resulted in limitations on direct hinterland engagement. While contact with the Nile was quotidian and tangible, an ordinary Egyptian's interaction with people and places beyond the Nile's green envelope was probably very limited. Connections to the immediate hinterlands of wadis might have been sustained at the household level, but contacts beyond that were "probably the province of military patrols and specialist traders and travellers."<sup>54</sup> The "flow" of interaction was tightly bounded by the Nile, but the context of that flow was highly homogenized in a people that fervently adhered to singular religious traditions, a single written

51 Hassan, "Town and Village in Ancient Egypt."

52 Hassan, "Town and Village in Ancient Egypt," discusses the ways in which the annual fluctuations of the Nile provided the opportunity for chiefs to emerge as local authorities who redistributed food when floods were too little or too great, facilitating chiefly aggrandizement and settlement interdependence.

53 For the suggestion of a paucity of information about ordinary people, see Moreno García, *The State in Ancient Egypt*; Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 39, 184.

54 Bunbury, *The Nile and Ancient Egypt*, 46.

language, and a singular mode of aesthetic expression.<sup>55</sup> Even when people from outside Egypt came to settle there, they often took on Egyptian names, personas, and ways of life and death.<sup>56</sup>

Within Egypt itself, an additional measure of the commanding presence of the Nile as a component of state formation and identity is the fact that the one place within the Nile valley that might have expressed geographic autonomy never apparently did so. This was the area of the Fayum, a low-lying depression on the western side of the Nile seventy-five kilometers south of Memphis and thus well within the heart of the Egyptian state. The depression was much larger than any other area filled by the waters of the Nile, measuring nearly sixty by sixty kilometers and thus the only place along the Nile where one could live without witnessing the desert on a daily basis. The Fayum was first occupied in the Neolithic and remained occupied throughout the period of the Egyptian state; although the Fayum had a settlement density that grew and shrank with the climate changes that reduced the water supply from the Nile, its bountiful wild fauna and tremendous capacities for agricultural production were acted upon by Egyptian leaders who built dams and canals to assure a continuous supply of water starting in the Middle Kingdom period.<sup>57</sup> It is precisely in this location of the Fayum that an internal rebellion might have been seeded, but there is no record of the use of the Fayum as a power base for separatism.

The psychological concept of insularity along the Nile as a form of home-like solidarity, validation and emotion enables us to address some of the other components of the Egyptian state over time, such as the limited contact with Mesopotamia even though it was a contemporary state with much to offer in terms of culture, exotic trade goods, and craft specialists.<sup>58</sup> The buffering

55 The homogenization of Egyptian culture started with the initial organization of the state, in which there emerged a singular religious, scribal, and cultural perspective in which “The ideology of the Early Dynastic state thus incorporated all the elements that defined ancient Egypt for 3,000 years or more afterwards,” Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 41.

56 Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, e.g., 163.

57 Hassan and Tassie, “Modelling Environmental and Settlement Change”; Römer, “The Nile in the Fayum.”

58 There were few Mesopotamian objects in Egypt, and no Egyptian objects in Mesopotamia (Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 47–48). The question of Egyptian-Mesopotamian contacts is likely to be obscured by perishables or goods that could be reconstituted, such as gold. There appears to be an ongoing difference of opinion among Egyptologists about the extent and impacts of interactions with Mesopotamian political entities over time but it seems clear that early encounters were ephemeral at best as encapsulated in Hartung’s comment that “apart from iconographic similarities and other possible ‘influences’ there are no respectable archaeological finds during the 4th millennium BCE—neither in Mesopotamia nor in Egypt—which might prove

effects of the desert, and the laboriousness of interactions with non-Egyptian people may also have been a reason why Hatshepsut's expedition to the Land of Punt was portrayed as so distinctive, or why the tone of the Amarna letters suggests that the concept of diplomatic correspondence was perhaps a curious novelty.<sup>59</sup> Trade activities (as seen in the Uluburun shipwreck, for example) did not seem to provide an impetus for widespread political expansion as might be ascertained for territorial political empires that expanded their reach along military and trade routes. External expansion requiring significant efforts were limited to the time period of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties with the expansion of rule over parts of the Levant accentuated by the Egyptian historical claims of a great battle at the site of Qadesh under Ramesses II (1275 BCE).

The effect of insularity in the Egyptian case is seen not only in the limited political effects of the Egyptian state outside of the Nile valley, but also the limited evangelism of the Egyptian culture, religion and writing system. Egyptian ritual traditions were long-lived, coherent, stable and had an extensive and precise written corpus with careful prescriptions for morality as well as for both daily and mortuary ritual in ways that should have rendered it possible to become a regional or even global religious tradition.<sup>60</sup> Some sculptural images are found in the Levant, but by and large Egyptian religious practices such as those exhibited in burial customs were rarely taken up outside of Egypt, even in areas of Egyptian control.<sup>61</sup> Portable religious objects appear to have served primarily as curiosities until the period of Greek expansion and Roman hegemony that started in the first millennium BCE, at which point the Egyptian goddess Isis became a cult favorite in the Mediterranean.<sup>62</sup> Even then, it was the iconography rather than the complete package of practice that traveled outside of the Nile valley; for example, Isis was strongly linked to the post-mummification process in Egypt, but in the absence of those distinctly

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concrete interrelations between the two regions, such as trade, apart from some lapis lazuli beads in Predynastic Naqada tombs, which must have come from Afghanistan" (Hartnung, "Interconnections Between the Nile Valley and the Southern Levant," 107).

59 Consider, for example, the numerous petulant comments in Amarna letter EA 1, "The Pharaoh Complains to the Babylonian King" (Moran, *The Amarna Letters*).

60 The sense of insular domesticity may even help to explain the hyper-development of religion through repetitions of distinct kinds of monumentality as seen in other islands such as Rapa Nui, Malta, and Bali where the natural characteristics of the landscape were accentuated through human efforts of religious construction.

61 For burial customs, see Burke, *et al.*, "Excavations of the New Kingdom Fortress in Jaffa, 2011–2014," 90; for statues, see Morris, "Exchange, Extraction, and the Politics of Ideological Money Laundering."

62 For the Greek and Roman adoption of the cult of Isis, see Bøgh, "The Graeco-Roman Cult of Isis."



Egyptian funerary practices abroad her iconography was merged with other known goddesses of fertility and motherhood.<sup>63</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

The Egyptian realm was perhaps the exception to the global expression of states as entities whose landscape boundaries were perceived as expansive and distant. Every denizen could experience the perimeter of the Egyptian state, because for all practical purposes the jurisdiction of the state ended at the edge of the valley where fertile agricultural fields met the unambiguous finality of the desert. As the only viable habitation area in northeastern Africa, the Nile valley provided an internal linear connectivity that meant that people could more easily communicate and interact with others along the river than with any other areas. Contacts that did occur with individuals from outside the Nile valley were the result of political or economic interaction rather than significant social, cultural, or religious integration with neighboring groups. The result was a distinctive island-like atmosphere of social and political development.

An insularity model, applied to Egypt, does more than describe the conditions under which Egyptian states developed in the *longue durée* of the late Holocene. It enables us to also address what states need in order to function, given that they are philosophical and experiential constructs that require the participation of many different people and groups. Yet unlike a city which is a fixed, long-lived entity that provides tangible benefits to its inhabitants (shelter, economies of scale, opportunities for specialized employment and education) the “state” is an ephemeral concept with boundaries and rationales that cannot always be verified by the majority of participants. A phenomenological analysis is one which evaluates how “people engage with memory and construct knowledge as they move through places.”<sup>64</sup> In Egypt, the Nile itself was an agent of movement and the central focus of a landscape in which the viability of human lives was mapped directly onto the physical realm of linear statecraft.

63 Bøgh, “The Graeco-Roman Cult of Isis.”

64 Van Dyke, “Visual Perception in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico,” 282.

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