



A Short History of Ancient Egypt [Quintessential Classics] [Illustrated]

George Rawlinson

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Hitherto Egypt had been ruled from a site at the junction of the narrow Nile valley with the broad plain of the Delta—a site sufficiently represented by the modern Cairo. But now there was a shift of the seat of power. There is reason to believe that something like a disruption of Egypt into separate kingdoms took place, and that for a while several distinct dynasties bore sway in different parts of the country. Disruption was naturally accompanied by weakness and decline. The old order ceased, and opportunity was offered for some new order—some new power—to assert itself. The site on which it arose was one three hundred and fifty miles distant from the ancient capital, or four hundred and more by the river. Here, about lat. 26°, the usually narrow valley of the Nile opens into a sort of plain or basin. The mountains on either side of the river recede, as though by common consent, and leave between themselves and the river's bank a broad amphitheatre, which in each case is a rich green plain—an alluvium of the most productive character—dotted with dom and date palms, sometimes growing single, sometimes collected into clumps or groves. On the western side the Libyan range gathers itself up into a single considerable peak, which has an elevation of twelve hundred feet. On the east the desert-wall maintains its usual level character, but is pierced by valleys conducting to the coast of the Red Sea. The situation was one favourable for commerce. On the one side was the nearest route through the sandy desert to the Lesser Oasis, which commanded the trade of the African interior; on the other the way led through the valley of Hammamât, rich with breccia verde and other valuable and rare stones, to a district abounding in mines of gold, silver, and lead, and thence to the Red Sea coast, from which, even in very early times, there was communication with the opposite coast of Arabia, the region of gums and spices.

In this position there had existed, probably from the very beginnings of Egypt, a provincial city of some repute, called by its inhabitants Apé or Apiu, and, with the feminine article prefixed, Tapé, or Tapiu, which some interpret "The city of thrones". To the Greeks the name "Tapé" seemed to resemble their own well-known "Thebai", whence they transferred the familiar appellation from the Bæotian to the Mid-Egyptian town, which has thus come to be known to Englishmen and Anglo-Americans as "Thebes." Thebes had been from the first the capital of a "nome". It lay so far from the court that it acquired a character of its own—a special cast of religion, manners, speech, nomenclature, mode of writing, and the like—which helped to detach it from Lower or Northern Egypt more even than its isolation. Still, it was not until the northern kingdom sank into decay from internal weakness and exhaustion, and disintegration supervened in the Delta and elsewhere, that Thebes resolved to assert herself and claim independent sovereignty. Apparently, she achieved her purpose without having recourse to arms. The kingdoms of the north were content to let her go. They recognized their own weakness, and allowed the nascent power to develop itself unchecked and unhindered...

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