Egypt: The Gift of the Nile

The Greek historian Herodotus called ancient Egypt the "gift of the Nile." He attributed the growth of Egypt's highly-developed civilization to the Nile River. Ancient Egypt would have been nothing more than a desert without the yearly overflow of this mighty river.

The Nile River begins in Central Africa and flows more than three thousand miles northward to the Mediterranean Sea. Each summer, the Nile overflows its banks and floods the land for approximately ten miles on each side. When the water recedes, the soil is left rich and fertile for farming. This rich soil enabled people long ago to settle in that area and, in time, develop one of the ancient world's greatest civilizations.

The annual overflow of the Nile River led the ancient Egyptians to develop history's first calendar. They noted that the flooding of the river occurred at the same time Sirius, the Dog Star, appeared in the sky. Counting 365 days between each sighting of the star, they devised a calendar of 12 months, each with 30 days. The extra five days per year were set aside for holidays and feasting.

The ancient Egyptians controlled the waters of the Nile through a series of canals, dikes, and irrigation ditches. Protected on all sides by either mountains, deserts, or water, they were free to build their society without fear of invasion. Farmers along the banks of the river grew wheat, barley, and cotton.

About 3400 B.C., all of Egypt was united under one ruler. This ruler was the pharaoh, or king. The word pharaoh means "royal or great house." Dynasties, or families, of pharaohs ruled Egypt for the next three thousand years.

Fill in the blanks to complete the following statements about ancient Egypt.

1. The Nile River flows northward to the __________________ Sea.
2. The Nile overflows _________ a year.
3. The ancient Egyptian calendar consisted of twelve months divided into ____ days each. Five extra days were used for __________ and __________.
4. Ancient Egypt was protected from invasion by these geographical features: __________, __________, and __________.
5. Egyptian kings were called ________________.
6. What role did the Nile River play in the development of Egyptian civilization?
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
7. The pharaoh of ancient Egypt was an absolute monarch. How does the power of such a ruler differ from that of a constitutional monarch like Queen Elizabeth of Great Britain?
   ______________________________________________________
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