



Chapter 7

Geography and the Early Settlement of Egypt, Kush, and Canaan

How did geography affect early settlement in Egypt, Kush, and Canaan?

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will explore how geography affected three civilizations that arose in northern Africa and southwestern Asia. These were the civilizations of the ancient Egyptian, Kushite (KUH-shite), and Israelite peoples.

The Egyptians settled along the Nile River, in the northeast corner of Africa. Their civilization lasted from around 3100 B.C.E. to 350 C.E. The Kushites settled to the south of Egypt, along the southern part of the Nile River. Their civilization began around 2000 B.C.E. and lasted until 350 C.E. The Israelites, later called Jews, settled northeast of Egypt, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, in about 1800 B.C.E. Although the Jews were forced from their homeland in 70 C.E., their civilization continues to flourish today.

Environmental factors greatly affected where people settled. Three important factors were water, topography (the shape and elevation of the surface features of the land), and vegetation (plant life). These three factors were determined by each area's **physical geography**. Physical geography includes mountains, rivers, valleys, deserts, climate, and the fertility of the soil.

In this chapter, you will learn why water, topography, and vegetation were important to early human settlement. You will explore the physical geography of the lands of the ancient Egyptians, Kushites, and Israelites. You'll find out how environmental factors in these places affected people's choices of where to live.

◀ The Nile River provided people with fresh water and fertile land.



This satellite photograph shows the Nile River and its delta at the Mediterranean Sea. The Red Sea is seen at right.

topography the shape and elevation of surface features, such as mountains or deserts, of a place or region

vegetation the plants of a place or region

7.2 Environmental Factors and Early Human Settlement

In ancient times, environmental factors influenced people's choices of where to settle. Three important environmental factors were water, **topography**, and **vegetation**.

Water The most important environmental factor in early human settlement was water. Physical features like rivers, lakes, and inland seas were good sources of fresh water.

Water was important for many reasons. People needed fresh drinking water to live. They also bathed and washed things in fresh water. Bathing and washing helped prevent disease.

Water was a source of food. People caught fish from rivers, lakes, and seas. They hunted water birds and other animals that gathered near water.

In addition, farmers needed water to grow their crops. For this reason, farmers often settled near rivers. A river's natural flooding could help irrigate their farms. Farmers could also dig canals or trenches to direct river water to their crops. For example, farmers in Mesopotamia dug canals for this purpose.

Water was also used for transportation. Cities and towns often used rivers as "highways." People traveled in boats to visit relatives and trade goods. Towns near the sea could trade goods with countries far away.

Topography A second environmental factor was topography. Topography refers to the shape and elevation of the land. It includes features like mountains, hills, plains, valleys, and deserts.

The topography of an area was important for early human settlement. Farmers preferred to settle in flat, open areas such as plains and valleys. Large, flat spaces gave farmers room to plant crops. Also, the rich soil in coastal plains and river valleys was excellent for growing these crops.

Mountains were less friendly to human settlement. Steep mountains were hard to cross. Their jagged peaks, cold temperatures, and rocky land made farming difficult.

Deserts also discouraged settlement. They were hot and dry. They contained very little water for farming. Sandstorms occurred when strong winds carried dense clouds of sand that could block out the sun. The intense heat, lack of water, and sandstorms made travel and living in the desert difficult.

Vegetation A third environmental factor was vegetation, or plant life. There are many kinds of vegetation, such as trees, bushes, flowers, grass, and reeds. The crops people grow are also a type of vegetation.

Many **aspects** of physical geography affect vegetation. A climate with mild weather and regular rain is good for plant life. Fresh water supports the growth of vegetation. The areas around rivers and lakes are usually green and lush. Mountains are often covered with thick groves of trees. Dry and hot deserts have very little vegetation.

The vegetation in an area influenced early human settlement in several ways. Most important, plants were a source of food. People could eat the wild plants available and also the crops they planted. Vegetation had other uses as well. People learned to make many useful products out of plants, including baskets, tools, medicine, rope, and even paper. Trees provided shade from the hot sun. And plants and flowers added natural beauty to a place.

Wherever people settled in the ancient world, water, topography, and vegetation were important factors. Let's look at how these environmental factors influenced the early settlements of the Egyptians, Kushites, and Israelites.

Identify three environmental factors in this photograph. Why might they be important to the people living here?



Nile River the longest river in the world, flowing through eastern Africa to a delta in northeastern Egypt

Egypt a nation in northeast Africa, first settled around 3100 B.C.E.

Kush a society along the Nile River, south of Egypt, from about 2000 B.C.E. to 350 B.C.E.

Mediterranean Sea a body of water north of Africa

7.3 Environmental Factors and the Early Settlement of Egypt and Kush

The Egyptians and Kushites both settled near the **Nile River**. The Egyptians lived along the northern part of the river. The Kushites lived to the south.

Why did settlements in these areas cluster around the Nile River? Let's look at the physical features of **Egypt** and **Kush** to see how environmental factors favored settlement near the Nile.

Physical Features of Egypt and Kush The most important physical feature in ancient Egypt and Kush was the Nile River. Flowing north from east Africa, the Nile created a long, fertile valley that ended in a marshy delta where the river emptied into the **Mediterranean Sea**.

The Nile River valley was bordered by the Libyan Desert to the west and the Nubian Desert to the east. These sandy deserts were extremely hot and dry. Most people avoided these areas, although the deserts did play one important role in the settlement of Egypt and Kush. They formed a natural barrier that helped protect people living in the Nile River valley. The deserts did not support large settlements, and few invaders wanted to risk crossing these harsh places.

On the north, Egypt was bordered by the Mediterranean Sea. Settlers could not drink its sparkling salt water, but the sea was rich in fish and other kinds of seafood. It was also a waterway that linked ancient Egypt to other civilizations.

To the east of Egypt and Kush was a long channel of very salty water called the Red Sea. The climate in this area was hot and dry. Much of the land near the Red Sea was desert.

This map shows bodies of water that encouraged settlement and travel in parts of ancient Egypt and Kush. It also shows deserts, which made life and travel hard.



Environmental Factors and Human Settlement in Egypt and Kush Environmental factors in ancient Egypt and Kush greatly favored settlement near the Nile River. Most important, the Nile was a source of fresh water in an area that was mostly desert.

The lack of water in the deserts made them unfit for farming. But in the Nile River valley, the river provided natural irrigation and fertilization. Every summer, the river overflowed its banks. The floodwaters soaked the dry ground for several weeks. As the water level decreased, a thin layer of silt (very fine particles of rock) was left behind. This soil was perfect for farming.

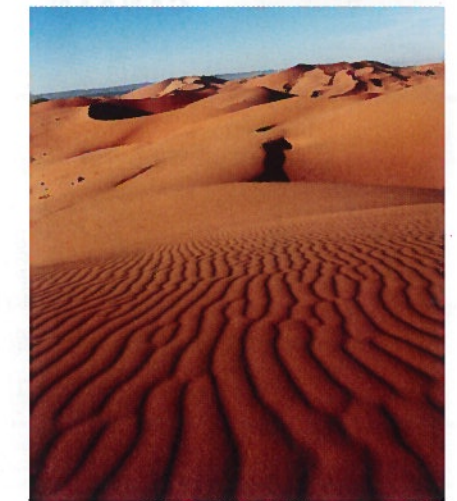
Also, where there was fresh water, people were more likely to find fish to catch and animals to hunt. The abundant wildlife in the Nile region included fish, ducks, geese, hippos, crocodiles, giraffes, and ostriches.

The topography of the river valley also encouraged human settlement. In the south, parts of the Nile ran through narrow valleys between steep hills. But there were also wide, flat areas of land around deep bends in the river. These flat areas were good for farming. In the north, wide plains were watered by the Nile's annual flooding.

Vegetation was rare in the dry deserts, but it was plentiful in the Nile River valley. Useful plants included reeds and a tough water plant called papyrus. People wove reeds into baskets, and roofs for their huts. Papyrus was used to make rope and paper. And the rich farmland was good for growing crops like wheat and barley.

Africa's Nile River is the longest river in the world. It is more than 4,100 miles long and flows from south to north, emptying into the Mediterranean Sea.

Deserts are natural barriers against invaders. Would you spend days crossing this hot, dry desert to fight those who live on the other side?



Canaan a land northeast of Egypt, settled by the ancient Israelites, from about 1800 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.

Jordan River a river in southwestern Asia that flows from the Lebanon Mountains, south through the Sea of Galilee, into the Dead Sea

7.4 Environmental Factors and the Early Settlement of Canaan

The ancient Israelites settled in **Canaan** (KAY-nen), a **diverse** land along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Canaan's physical features and environmental factors made settlement easier in some parts of the region than in others.

Physical Features of Canaan Canaan's physical features included plains and valleys, hills and mountains, deserts, and bodies of water.

In the west, coastal plains bordered the Mediterranean Sea. To the north, the Lebanon Mountains rose steeply from the coast. The southern part of this range gave way to the lower hills of Galilee.

The **Jordan River** flowed down from a mountain range through the middle of Canaan, heading south through the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. The land around the narrow river valley

included hills, grassy slopes, and mountains. To the east lay the hot, dry Syrian Desert. In southwestern Canaan was the Negev (NEH-gehv) Desert. Rain soaked this area during the winter months, supplying the Negev with more water than most deserts receive.

Environmental Factors and Human Settlement in Canaan In Canaan, as in Egypt and Kush, water was a key environmental factor. In very ancient times, the wet, fertile plains near the Mediterranean Sea were farmed. The Mediterranean also enabled traders from many lands to visit Canaan.

Other bodies of water also played a role in the settlement of Canaan. The Sea of Galilee was actually a freshwater lake. It had plentiful fish, and fertile land was nearby. Another large lake, the Dead Sea, was so salty that nothing grew in it, not even plants. The area near the Dead Sea was hot and dry, making it unsuitable for farming.

The main source of fresh water was the Jordan River. People living near the river hunted, fished, and farmed along its banks.

But unlike the Nile River, the Jordan River did not flood regularly, so its valley was not as fertile as the Nile's.

Canaan's varied topography greatly influenced patterns of settlement. Farmers found it easiest to live on the Mediterranean's coastal plains and near the Jordan River. In other areas, the hilly land and dry soil made growing crops difficult. As a result, many people, including the ancient Israelites, became herders rather than farmers. Herders tended flocks of sheep, goats, cattle, donkeys, and camels. Unlike farmers, herders were nomads, wandering from place to place in search of good land for their animals to graze.

People found it hardest to settle in the mountains and deserts. Mountainous land and dry desert land were both difficult to farm. Still, some people did live in these areas. Nomads sometimes herded cattle and camels in the Negev and Syrian deserts.

In general, Canaan's hot, dry climate discouraged abundant plant life. Vegetation was most plentiful near the Jordan River. Some areas had small forests. Others had only short, scrubby plants. Grasslands were common, though, and herders made good use of them to feed their animals.



While parts of the Jordan River valley were lush, the area was not as fertile as the Nile River valley.

The physical features of Canaan affected where Israelites settled.

Physical Features of Ancient Canaan



Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how three environmental factors influenced the early settlement of ancient Egypt, Kush, and Canaan.

Environmental Factors Three important environmental factors are water, topography, and vegetation. These factors greatly affected where ancient people settled.

Early Settlement of Egypt and Kush In Egypt and Kush, most people farmed in the fertile Nile River valley. The Nile River provided fresh water in an area that was mostly desert. The topography of the Nile River valley made the land good for farming. The valley also supported useful vegetation like reeds and papyrus.

Early Settlement of Canaan In Canaan, the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee were important sources of fresh water. Much of the land, however, was too hot, dry, or hilly for farming. As a result, many people, including the ancient Israelites, were herders rather than farmers. Herders were nomads who moved from place to place to find grasslands where their animals could graze.