

MENES



If you were to fly over the northern part of the continent of Africa, you would soon tire of seeing the same thing out of your plane's tiny window. It would seem as if the red sand swirling on the barren plains covered the whole world. And indeed, it does cover over three million square miles of it! After a long time, once you had finished reading your entire novel and played the game 'dots' with your sister, you might look out of the window again. Everything would still look the same. There would be no buildings, no farms, no animals or people....but wait, what is that black line you see snaking across the red sand? It is very far away. As the plane moves closer, you can see that in the middle of the black line is a large river. Your father might tell you that this is one of the most famous rivers in the world, the Nile River, where Egyptian civilization began. You find out that the black stuff that spreads alongside the river is silt, which is left on top of the red sand every time the Nile River floods over its banks. Because the silt is very fertile soil and plants can grow in it, it now looks green and cool and inviting. As the plane circles lower in order to land, you fly over a few farms and can see a city in the distance.

There weren't always cities full of bustling people alongside the Nile in Egypt. In fact, long ago, long before Christ was born, there were not even any small tribes of people living near the river. Sometimes, nomads (people who lived in the hot, red Sahara Desert) would find the fertile black soil with verdant plants and they would let their animals feast on the tender green shoots. However, after a few months they would move on. Why would they leave this fertile green place? Well, unfortunately, it did not stay green and fertile for long.

Each year, when the Nile began to swell and then flood its banks, spreading the silt all over the red sand, the dry parched earth would drink in the good, fresh water and the buried seeds would moisten and sprout, finding their nourishment in the black silt. They would grow quickly and become strong, healthy plants. But once the Nile River returned to its own bed, the blazing sun would evaporate the precious water and the silt would quickly dry up, becoming a parched and cracked layer of dry mud. The plants once so tender and strong would begin to wilt and turn to dust and the animals have no more to eat. The nomads would have to move again in search of a new source of food.

The nomadic life was hard, though, and every once in a while an enterprising nomad would give up the life which required him always to move from place to place. He would try to survive all year in the same place. He would learn that he could take seeds, plant them in the silt, and instead of waiting for the Nile River to flood he would water the little seeds himself, bringing them to maturity. Because he could grow his own food, he

did not have to keep moving in search of new food sources. As time passed, more nomads settled by the river and learned to irrigate (water) their crops. Small tribes of people sprang up all along the river. Usually, the strongest or cleverest man would be the leader of the tribe. Often, different tribes would fight against each other, and sometimes they would merge into one tribe.

After a long time, there were three main tribes, which were now called kingdoms. The Lower Kingdom (which was actually north of the other kingdoms) was ruled by the Bee King and he wore a red crown. The Middle Kingdom was ruled by the Reed King who wore a white crown. The Upper Kingdom (which was actually south of the other kingdoms) was ruled by the Hawk King. These kings would fight against each other, trying to take over the other kingdoms and thereby making their own the biggest. About three-thousand years before Christ was born, there was a Hawk King who was such a fearsome warrior that he was given the nickname of Scorpion. Scorpion managed to first take over the Reed King's kingdom and then to take over the Bee King's kingdom. Now, all of Egypt belonged to one king. In order to show that he was king over both of the other kingdoms, the Hawk King wore a crown that was both red and white.

The real name of this first king of the unified Egypt was Menes. Menes was a great warrior who liked to build things. He was also a very clever engineer. In order to situate his capital, Memphis, where he wanted it, he had to erect a "monster" dam to change the entire course of the Nile River. A construction project of this magnitude was almost unheard of in those ancient days, but he managed to do it. If you were to visit Egypt today, you would be able to see some parts of the path the river used to follow. Menes also built a very unusual tomb for himself. Although not much about it is known, scholars can tell that it was not much like the tombs and pyramids that later Pharaohs built. After Menes' tomb was built, it was covered over with sticks and then the sticks were set on fire. The scholars think that the tomb was probably covered over with clay and that the burning sticks caused the clay to become a hard shell overtop the tomb, keeping it safe.

One afternoon, while hunting on the banks of the Nile River, Menes the Unifier was startled as a great, grey, fearsome animal sprang up out of the reeds and charged towards him. Menes and the men around him tried to ward off the beast with their spears and knives, but the raging hippopotamus found its mark. Menes was slain and his sixty-two year reign came to a close.