

# INTRODUCTION

## Red river

Picture a river that flows through a quarter of all Africa, a river fed by smaller streams and other rivers, yet retaining in our mind a unity, a single identity, despite the diversity of the nations and tribes it passes through. One molecule of the water that rises in the forests of Burundi or in Lake Tana in Ethiopia can make its journey all the way to the Nile delta in Egypt and flow into the Mediterranean, and so justify our referring to the mighty system of the Nile as one river.

The Nile is mighty. If the Thames were on the same scale it would not end at Gravesend – it would swim the Channel, continue through Europe, cross all of Turkey and enter Iraq to issue like the Euphrates into the Arabian Gulf. Imagine travelling such a river, wanting to own it and control it. This has been the dream of men and nations since nations began with the world's first – the country known as Misr, Egypt.

These attempts at control have faded, the influence and consequences all forgotten. Only the stories remain. And the ruins of great buildings, old dams, temples and statues? Don't these exist too as the stories we tell of such buildings and their makers? Only the stories remain.

And what is the colour of such stories? A trick question. The stories that remain are always the most highly coloured, the most passion filled or the most blood curdling. Naturally, their colour is red.

Red. The real Nile isn't White or Blue or even Green. It's Red. For a moment when the Blue Nile in full flood enters the White Nile it backs up the river, reversing its flow for five miles, mixing its load of sediment with the clearer waters of the White Nile to make, for a few days, a blood-red river. This moment, in time and place, where Blue and White meet in the Sudan in early summer near Khartoum, is a magical metaphor for the world's greatest river: a river of blood, of life, of

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death. When Moses demanded that the Pharaoh allow the Israelites to leave, ten plagues were visited upon the Egyptians – the first being that the Nile turned into blood and all the fish died. Some commentators suggest this was a ‘red tide’, a rare algal bloom on the river’s surface, but we will, in a short while, discover better explanations for this seeming miracle. Later, in 1249, ‘Bloody’ Baiburs, the Mamluk defender of Egypt, put 3,000 French crusaders to the sword in the delta and turned ‘the mighty Nile red with blood’. This is a river that naturally runs red throughout history, the colour of wars, of creation, of struggle, of pilgrimage, of sickness, of triumph.

The White Nile and the Blue Nile are rivers, amazing rivers, but riverine in scope and history, like rivers, admittedly big rivers, the world over. The lower Nile, the only river to cross the Sahara Desert, is extraordinary in its own right too. But take them together – the Blue, White and lower Nile – and you have something truly remarkable. This is what I choose to call the Red Nile. It is the entire system of Niles, and it is without doubt the greatest and most influential river system in the world.

The Nile inspired Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC to seek its source to discover the explanation for its miraculous flood – which happens in summer. All other rivers in the ancient world flooded in winter. One reason for the incredible plenty of Egypt, which allowed it to amass grain and establish an urban culture (and the world’s first nation state), is the fact that just when you need water, when it’s hot and dry, you get a ton of it. A veritable flood, an inundation that bursts banks and brings life-giving silt into every field. And the sheer quantity of silt, which comes from the Ethiopian highlands, was unsurpassed in growing power until the advent of chemical fertilisers. With flood and flood-borne silt you have the makings of a country that the Romans would call the ‘breadbasket of the Empire’.

Alexander’s emissaries never did get to the source. Instead he turned to the Oracle in Siwa. The Boy King asked it to explain the summer inundation. There is no record of the oracular answer. But we now know the flood arises in the summer monsoon rains that deluge the Ethiopian highlands.

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### Creation's river

The banks of the Nile are smoking with the fires of the river dwellers. There are crocodiles and hippos, gazelle and ibis. Hyacinth floats mid-stream. A sacred river, old and contorted as a creation myth, the Red Nile absorbs all life and death and moves on. It swirls its way deep into Africa, its scale beyond comprehension.

So much begins on the banks of the Red Nile, on the palm-tree bank, the papyrus bank. All religion, all life, all stories. The script we write in, the language we speak. The gods and the legends and the names of stars. This great river, somehow unhurried, yet always swiftly moving on, has been history's greatest and most sustained creator.

The first people of the Red Nile were very probably the first people anywhere. They came up the Nile valley, an extension of the Great Rift Valley of east Africa. The rift was where all the little competing groups of humanoids first emerged. Eventually *Homo sapiens sapiens* made it up the rift and up the river, into Europe and the rest of the world.

These first humans were far from unimaginative. We encounter them through their art, drawn exquisitely on scooped-out cave walls, and through their tools: hand axes, heavy and scalloped, and flint arrowheads chipped from silica, a rare natural glass found only in the Egyptian Sahara, thought to have been formed by a meteor of massive proportions smashing into the sand and fusing with the Great Sand Sea into a wondrous aquarium green. (Millennia later, a large piece of this glass was transported by donkey and then up the Nile, so that the Pharaoh Tutankhamen could have it carved into a scarab and set in gold around his neck.)

### Stories remain

Older than Egypt, older than the current course of the Nile, is the *Crocodylus niloticus*, the Nile crocodile. There is one outside my window in Cairo, where the Nile moves with effortless ease, always wind lapped, always flowing north. The crocodile's appearance, usually among the reeds of some Nile-side suburb of Cairo, gets reported every two or three years. This time it surfaces in Maadi, where I live, a few miles from the centre of the city. Instead of being a wild creature it is a pet released by

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a bored owner. In ancient Egypt, the crocodile was a symbol of protection. It's comforting to have him near.

My home is one road back from the Corniche, the once grand, now faded and tatty avenue that runs alongside the Nile in Cairo. I can see the water between two new buildings: an oblong of river, a single palm and a patch of blue sky. In the late afternoon I can see, in this oblong, the sun setting directly behind the Pyramids, ten miles away – when the smog isn't too bad, that is. The Pyramids were built with giant limestone blocks carried to the Giza plateau by the floodwaters of the Nile. If you tried to build them today using the methods of the Pharaohs you couldn't, because the Aswan high dam has reduced the summer flood to no more than a quickening of the flow and a rise of a foot or so; this is all that remains of the great flood of the past. There is almost always a breeze blowing up or down the river and, remarkably, it is never crowded. On it sail pleasure boats, small dhows called feluccas named by the British after the Portuguese boats, also of Arab origin, that look similar. Far older are the rowing boats plied by the fishermen. The design, with an upturned bow and stern and square-shaped oars, is the same as those found in ancient tombs in Saqqara.

Families of fisherfolk live year round on the water. While the men usually have an outboard motor, the women and young men still have to row using big ungainly oars. They cast their nets and beat the water to drive the fish into them; as with the boats, there are 3,000-year-old friezes, in the tombs of Beni Hassan, depicting fishermen beating the waters, doing exactly the same as they do today. There is another type of fisherfolk I can only see when I get closer to the river, usually from the outdoor terrace of TGI Friday's, which serves ice-cold beer and overlooks the water. It is the Nile kingfisher, black and white to our kingfisher's blue, and it plunges from on high to splash into the water, a sudden flicker like a flash photo, surfacing with a blood-stained silvery fish in its beak. Not long ago, in a small rubber boat more suited to a beach than the Nile, I floated downstream for six miles, from my suburb to the city centre. I passed an island where, according to legend, Moses was left in his basket; a few miles further downstream was the spot where Joseph and Mary landed after their flight to Egypt. The present population were busy killing a lamb for the *eid* festival, there on the beach – they waved at me to join them and the kids jumped into the bloodied river to grab hold of my boat. The Red Nile won't let you

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get away from history – it's the source and the sauce in more ways than one.

People set eyes on the Nile and they are beset by a curious urge to travel up it, discover its secrets, own it, control its bounty. Most of the stories, the human stories, concern attempts successful or not to control this river. For millennia the Nile's flood was controlled by building up high banks or levees along the river. These would contain the flood. Then at right angles other embankments directed the flood's might right and left into large square basins, a patchwork of small lakes over which the populace would sail on papyrus rafts, wooden boats or even floating logs. The basins would dry up and be planted with grain which grew abundantly on such well-silted and well-watered soil. What follows is not the mainstream of history, chuntering on, year in, year out. Instead I have followed the metaphor a step further, written stories borne on the back of the Red Nile's flood, stories of excess, love, passion, splendour and death. Plenty of death.

But, while necessarily limiting myself to the bloodiest and best narratives, I found something odd happening. This patchwork of stories began to join up in most unexpected ways. Just as floodwaters link up overlooked canals and waterways I started to expect rather than be surprised by the often extraordinary connections between stories I uncovered. Who would have thought that the place where the crusaders' blood filled the Nile – Mansoura – would also be the place where, only a few years later, the first accurate description of the blood's circulation would be made? That Cleopatra would not only be the mistress of Caesar and travel up the Nile on a state boat with him, but also have an affair with the same King Herod who would later drive Mary and Joseph to embark on a less exclusive Nile cruise with their infant son Jesus? Or that an island in the Nile with the oldest flood-measuring device should also be the headquarters of the slave warrior Mamluks later to be exterminated by Muhammad Ali, the first man to interfere with the flood by building a barrage across the Nile? Or that Napoleon would inadvertently be the cause of both the Suez Canal and the translation of hieroglyphics? Or that Flaubert would almost literally walk in Florence Nightingale's footprints in the sand as he was only a few days behind her on a Nile cruise? Or that the Stanley who discovered Livingstone was the first man to visit the Blue Nile source before the White Nile source when he covered the little-known elephant war of 1868 in Ethiopia (accompanied coincidentally by James Grant, who

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had already been to the source of the White Nile and was now visiting the Blue Nile)? Or that the man whose brainchild was the Aswan high dam was a lone Greek inventor, who was inspired by the first Arab to try and dam the Nile, Ibn Haytham, who incidentally also invented the camera? Or that the first man to photograph the Nile, Maxime du Camp, would also be the man inadvertently to cause Flaubert to write *Madame Bovary*, the world's first modern novel? And these are only a few of the canals, irrigation ditches, patches of shining water that accompany any historical journey down the Nile.

I made the easy decision not to travel from the source to the sea in the rubber boat I travelled through Cairo in (or even one a little more seaworthy). I left my hang glider at home, so to speak, and forwent, rather easily, the temptation to jet ski like James Bond from Uganda to the Med. I'd need to read as much as make miles. Rather, I would travel at my own pace, and try to uncover the best stories, in all their light and darkness, the stories red in tooth and claw, the more bizarre the better, the blood and the guts of this river which spills into history. Only the stories remain.