

# GIANT AT THE CROSSROADS

*The Story of Ancient  
Civilization*

BY M. ILIN AND E. SEGAL



INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

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TRANSLATED BY  
BEATRICE KINKEAD

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE GIANT STARTS OUT

*1. How man lived in a narrow house. How he found the key to it and got out.*

When the African of ancient times looked around, he saw prison walls on his right and on his left—the hot expanse of the Arabian desert. The river Nile flowed through them. In front of him were the terrifying black depths of the sea, behind him the awful whirlpools and rapids of the underworld from which the Nile rose and flowed over the earth. Above arched the blue dome of the sky as if resting on the walls of the surrounding mountains.

The Egyptians thought this one little place was the whole world.

At first they called the river just Nile, meaning river, and themselves simply People, thinking there were no other rivers and no other people in the world.

They thought black a good color and red a bad color because their earth was black and out there on the desert the soil was red. The red soil was very near them but they did not venture out on it. The blue sea stretched out like a window into the world; but to them it seemed an impenetrable barrier. They thought the foam of the sea came from the mouth of the sea god and that the sea salt was poison.

The Egyptians lived like this for a thousand years without leaving their crowded world.



Time passed. The Nile gave them more and more grain, gave it to them as a gift for nothing. But people worked, kept on using their hands, and with every century the human hand became more deft and skillful. They found that keeping their war prisoners to work for them paid better than killing them or cutting off their hands and sending them to the chief for ransom. You can see these prisoners in the carvings, following behind the army, their hands tied behind their backs. The Egyptians herded them along with sticks—they were “foreigners,” sons of the devil.

The Egyptians had no word for “slave” as yet. They called new things by old names. The prisoners were the “living dead”—we find this combination of words, strange to our ears, on tombs and inscriptions. These “living dead” worked in the fields, dug canals, built dams.

Life changed in Egypt. The old system of primitive communism, under which all the members of a tribe owned land, dwelling places, flocks, and even tools in common, now gave way before a system of slavery.

Work, which had been common to all, was now divided up among hundreds of people. On the walls of tombs we can still see pictures of farmers and artisans doing their particular jobs: a potter spinning his potter’s wheel; a carpenter cutting a board with a saw; a cobbler making sandals as he sat on his low stool; a blacksmith working the bellows for his forge; and a plowman urging on his oxen.

Wherever the work was divided up, people began to exchange the different products of their work. On the walls of the tombs and the temples, pictures show a fisherman handing a fish from his basket to the blacksmith in exchange for fishhooks; a farmer exchanging his produce for a pair of sandals; a bird catcher giving a bird in a cage for some fancy beads.

In the old tribal days when everything in the village was owned in common, people used to work out in the fields all

together. But now the rich, the noblemen, had large estates, and the poor had only narrow fields. The rich did not till their own land; they had slaves for that. During plowing and harvest, the big landowners hired free farmers to work for them. Even after a rich man died, people brought tribute to his grave. Pictures on the temple walls show peasants leading a young lamb to sacrifice, carrying baskets of fruit and pitchers of wine for the sacrificial ceremonies of a rich man's burial.

And as the system of production changed, people's ideas changed too.

The Egyptians began to get the idea that strangers were "people" too. But it was a long time before they realized that they were the same kind of people as themselves.

Foreigners, they said, are poor, despised creatures. The god Ra hates them. The sun does not shine for them, it shines only for Egyptians. It was not a crime to kill a slave.

It was still a narrow little world the Egyptians lived in. Centuries succeeded centuries. The Egyptians got out of their homes oftener and oftener, led by the god of war, Vespuat, Opener of Roads. They needed slaves, and the only way they could get them was to capture them in war. They needed cedar for building, copper for axes, and gold and ivory for palaces and temples. What they could not take with the sword, they got by bartering grain, arms, and ornaments.

In the south, on the "Ivory Island," they met their black-skinned neighbors, the Nubian elephant hunters. The Egyptians spread their wares out on the beach: copper knives, necklaces, and beads. The Nubians brought their ivory tusks and gold-bearing sand.

They began to bargain about the price and the little settlement where all this took place was called Cevene, meaning "price."

Their other neighbors to the north, the Phoenicians, came in ships. They dragged their galleys up on the beach, tied

them securely with hawsers to a big rock on shore, and unloaded their cedar logs and copper ore.

Geography began with trade. Islands, mountains, valleys were named. You can tell at once from their names what the country produced: "Cedar Valley" is covered with cedar trees. From Cyprus, "Copper Island," came copper. Silver came from the far-away "Silver Mountains," which we now call Taurus.

Once man thought there was nothing smaller than a grain of sand and nothing bigger than a mountain. We still use the expressions "tiny as a grain of sand" and "big as a mountain."

But men kept on penetrating into the world of things so small you cannot see them with the naked eye. They felt their way like blind men, seeking a way to get metal. Men who worked with metal, the smiths, called in fire to help them and from the ore the fire released the copper which came pouring out, bright, sparkling, and resonant.

When a man found a bit of ore he regarded it as a great treasure and looked into it, seeking a key to the world of big things in the world of tiny things.

Huge century-old trees fell in the Vale of Cedars. The Phoenicians, with their sharp copper axes, hewed their little pointed galleys out of those stout trunks. First they cut a long beam. To it they fastened the skeleton of the boat, getting the sides even by using a leather measuring thong; then they joined them together along the top and put the deck over all. They made the keel like a fish's tail, so that the galley could float in the water like a fish; the prow like the beak of a huge bird, so that it could skim along the waves like a bird in the air.

There it was—a marvelous wonder—to carry them to unknown lands.

But who was the funny-looking little figure of a man they put up so carefully on the prow? That was the dwarf Puam,

the god of the hammer. Why shouldn't they take him with them? You see, it was he who helped them get the ore out of the dark mines; he was the one who forged the axes in the smithy. And he was not afraid of work when the carpenters were building a ship. Let him come out of his world of tiny things to watch over his child, the ship, out in the vast wastes of the great world.

Centuries passed. It was now not five thousand years but four thousand years before the beginning of our era.

Phoenician galleys went all over the Mediterranean Sea, ever farther and farther, founding settlements on islands and peninsulas, setting up trading posts and establishing colonies of settlers.

They came to the gateway of the ocean and saw the Pillars of Melkart—Melkart who built the walls of the Phoenician city of Tyre. He it was who placed these pillars at the exit from the sea into the ocean as a sign that no one should go beyond that point. It was as if he said to the sailors: "Stop! Not a step farther! You have already gone far from the walls of your mother city. Stop here, at the edge of the world."

For many years sailors did not dare disobey this command. The shoreless expanse of the ocean opening beyond the gateway was terrifying.

But unseen countries tempted the more venturesome merchants, and one after another they did go through the gateway. The oars sang as the rowers bent to them. There in the distance were the coasts of France and Spain, where wild men still lived. Phoenicians reached the tin-bearing island of Britain and the amber shore of the Baltic.

People were now wandering all over the earth. Meanwhile the earth pursued its regular course round the sun.

Centuries passed. Now it was not 4000 B.C. but 2800.

Wise King Solomon asked his neighbor and friend Hiram, king of the Phoenicians, to send him some experienced sailors to man his ships. On those ships the Hebrews and Phoe-

nicians went to the Red Sea and the distant lands of Persia and India to get gold and silver for their palaces and temples, ivory, monkeys, peacocks. . . .

The boundaries of the world were pushed back.

But the sailors did not yet venture out into the open ocean. They thought they might not be able to find their way back, for, you see, land and sea were two very different things. Oars left no trace on the water, but on land you could find your way back by your own footsteps or by marks blazed on the trunks of the cedars as you went. And here and there you might find a pile of stone to mark an old settlement. Bits of broken pottery or the whitened bones of sheep and camels might be scattered along an old caravan route. There were even milestones to show where a road went, and people used to worship these black milestones as gods.

The very contours of the ground would show the road. A traveler could find his way by carefully taking note of every hillock and valley as he went.

But on the sea . . . there was nothing but the tossing, ever-changing waves. You could not tell one from another. There were no traces of settlements. The water forever hid from sight the corpses of the men drowned and the wreckage of ships. How in the world could you keep from getting lost out there with nothing but blue sea below and blue sky above?

Man threw his head back and looked up into the sky, searching among the stars for milestones and markers. And sure enough, the sun showed him which way was south during the day, and the Little Dipper pointed north at night. That's why they called the constellation of the Little Dipper "The Wagon"—it was the vehicle of travelers.

So man mastered his own planet by looking at the sun and the stars. He searched among the planets for a key to his big world and found keys both in the unseen world of tiny things and in the great world of other planets.

Now the sea which used to separate one country from another united them instead!

The foreigners brought with them not only pottery, textiles, and slaves, but also foreign beliefs, foreign customs, foreign arts and crafts. Writing was carried from Crete to Phoenicia, from Phoenicia to Greece, changing as it went from pictures to letters—to an alphabet.

On every Phoenician ship that sailed there was one man who could read and write. He took notes, kept accounts. For, you see, he had to give an accurate account to the owner of the ship when it got back home. So the Phoenician galleys took along with them not only strong Palestinian wines and shimmering red garments, but also the letters of the alphabet—the first alphabet in the world. We still have these Phoenician words in our language: galley, wine, alphabet.

Peoples perished, kingdoms fell, rolls of papyrus were scattered far and wide in ashes. But the alphabet did not disappear—the letters lived on. Time itself had no power over them.

Mankind had no more precious possession than these two dozen or so signs. By a light but strong bridge they connected one nation with another from age to age. If it had not been for letters, how could we have known what man's thought created during those long-drawn-out centuries? Memory has no boundaries that can contain all knowledge. We have to call on the alphabet for help. These letters create anew the old forgotten world, unite mankind, ancient and modern, in one long continuous chain. We see what no longer exists, hear long-silent voices.

But let us get back to our Phoenician sailors.

When they arrived at an unknown shore, they managed to make themselves understood through interpreters. They had to know what kind of people lived in each place, whether they were wild men who did not know the truth or men who



worshipped gods. It sometimes happened that the strangers greeted their guests with a hail of spears and arrows. That was a lesson for the guests. They became more cautious. Next time they spread out their wares on the sandy beach and lighted a bonfire. They put out to sea and kept away from shore.

The hosts saw the smoke of the fire and cautiously approached to get the gifts spread out there and leave gifts in exchange. So people met each other without seeing one another at all.

But everything went very differently when the merchants arrived at a place where they were already acquainted. Here they dragged their galleys up on the beach, with big ropes made them fast to some heavy stone, and spread out their wares on the stern of their boats, just like a counter in a store. Women crowded round, and even the chief's daughter would come along with a group of her friends.

The trading was carried on peacefully. But it sometimes happened that at the very last moment, when everything was sold and the ship was ready to put out to sea, the peaceful traders suddenly turned into robbers. They would seize the women and drag them to the ship. The women would scream for help, but already it was too late. A favorable breeze would spread the white sails, the oarsmen would bend to their oars, and the ship would be off, growing smaller and smaller in the distance.

Mothers would weep and tear their clothes. The older women would try to comfort them: "Evidently it is the will of the gods that even the proud daughter of the chief should taste the bitterness of slavery."

2. *Man finds himself in a new world he does not understand.*

Another century passed. Ships kept going ever farther and farther. The world kept growing wider and wider, like the higher and wider circles an eagle makes as it rises in the air.

The Greeks began to compete with the Phoenicians. They reached Italy to the west, the Scythian steppe to the north. Farmers, colonizers from the Greek city of Miletus in Asia Minor, hunted wolves on the shores of the Black Sea. Milesian merchants sold beautifully decorated vases and embroidered wool cloth.

A big new world had opened out, a world full of mysteries and marvels. All you had to do was tie your ship to a foreign shore you had not seen before, and you were in fairyland. In this new world people did not yet understand what they saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears.

They heard strange, incomprehensible languages which sounded like the squeaking of a lot of bats or the chirping of birds. High mountains looked like pillars reaching to the sky.

When the travelers first saw monkeys, they thought they were hairy men and women who bit and scratched when you went near them. They called a bonfire on the beach a river of fire flowing into the sea.

To penetrate into the new world, man himself had to become new, different from what he had been. He had to learn to use oars to walk over the water. He used the four swift legs of the horse and the patient, long-suffering camel to open up for him the gates of the desert and the steppe. He penetrated into countries he had never seen before. But it was not enough just to see what he had never seen before—he also had to understand what he did not recognize. And this was the hardest of all.



You see, man was still measuring things by the old standards of his forefathers. Whenever he saw something new, he looked for the old and familiar in it. And if he did not find the old and familiar, he was lost and did not understand what he saw with his eyes.

Let us go back now to Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs who reigned three thousand years ago.

The Egyptians of that day thought their river was the only river in the world. Now this river flowed from south to north, so they thought this was the only way a river could flow. When they wanted to write “north,” they made a picture of a ship without sails going with the current. And to write “south,” they pictured a boat with sails going against the current.

But when they got out of their narrow little homeland, they found other rivers. They reached the Euphrates—and behold, the Euphrates flowed just the opposite way from their own river, from north to south instead of from south to north! This so surprised them that they decided to make a note of this wonderful discovery for their descendants. King Tut the First had a stone inscription made which said: “In the Euphrates the water turns round and flows back upstream.”

There were many things that surprised the Egyptians when they got outside their own country into the world. They were accustomed, for example, to having their crops watered by the overflow of the Nile; when they first saw rain falling, they thought it some kind of miraculous river coming down from the sky.

As time went on, they placed their inscriptions farther and farther out in the desert. These inscriptions celebrated the great deeds of the Pharaohs who “reigned over the earth from north to south, from east to west.”