

mances of African traditional music were involved in virtually every aspect of culture and were inseparable from the context in which they were performed.” Today, the centrality of music to life in Africa continues.

Music may be performed purely with the body, through singing, stomping, and clapping, but also through the use of a wide variety of musical instruments. Musical implements vary from region to region and include objects such as flutes, whistles, horns, rattles, gongs, bells, harps, and of course drums. Musical instruments are often highly decorated, which beautifies them and indicates their importance culturally. Decorations may also be an integral component of the sound an object makes, thus connecting ornamentation to the instrument’s functionality, as we will see in the Nubian lyre under discussion here. Decoration often relates not just to the aesthetic beauty of the instrument, but may also have traditional and symbolic meanings related to the particular use it fulfills.

The Nubian People of Northern Sudan

The region of ancient Nubia corresponds to present-day Egypt, the Sudan, and Ethiopia. Ancient Nubia was one of the oldest civilizations in the world. It, like ancient Egypt, was divided into two parts: Lower Nubia in the north and Upper Nubia in the south. Nubian culture centered, again like ancient Egyptian, on the Nile River. The river runs northward from the highlands of Eastern Africa down to the delta region in the north, where it empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, “upper” refers to the highlands of the more southerly area, where “lower” refers to the lowlands in the northern region. This may seem counterintuitive as we look at the map and think of “north” as “up” and “south” as “down,”



The region of ancient Nubia corresponds to present-day Egypt, the Sudan, and Ethiopia.

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but it accurately reflects the topography of the landscape.

The border between Upper and Lower Nubia coincides with the modern border between Egypt and the Sudan. In ancient times, 96 percent of this region was desert, with even less arable farmland than was present in Egypt. Nubian culture relied on the annual flooding of the Nile to bring the rich soil to the riverbanks, allowing for agricultural production.

Ancient Nubia was seen as the “gateway to Africa”—Nubia’s Nile Valley provided the only dependable route across the Saharan desert to the Mediterranean Sea, and thus Nubia became a key crossroads between the African interior and other civilizations in the broader region. The Nubians traded with the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, as well as with cultures from the Near East. Contact with this wide variety of cultures produced a particularly rich and complex society, one that was in direct