

ANCIENT EGYPT – Social Structure

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Overview While we must balk at the image of Egyptian social structure as pyramidal--a too easy association with the more than a hundred great structures which have become the trademarks for this ancient culture--there is nonetheless a familiar rigid geometry governing the Egyptian social hierarchy. Pharaoh on top, slaves at the bottom, and all the spaces in between to fill up--we know it doesn't work quite that way, and yet the pyramidal image is instructive.

Pharaoh Pharaoh, the term for the supreme Egyptian ruler (a god too), was not applied as a direct address term until the second millennium B.C.E, yet we can use the term properly to describe the god king who from (conventional date) 3000 B.C.E. was the supreme ruler of the Egyptian social situation. The Pharaoh, himself a god, had an overall job assignment: to please the gods, which meant to preserve the polity of the Egyptians; to direct their armed forces, collect necessary taxes, and lead negotiations with foreign powers. His right hand man, in all these jobs, was the **vizier**, the top supervisor.

Government officials These power wielders were the wealthiest classes, which gives you an idea of the importance of administration, in this state in which just that, management and control, were essential functions. (That means, on the whole, a static and bureaucratic state, like that of ancient China.)

Priests The priest were socially equivalent to the highest government officials, for their job was to man the innumerable temples that dotted the Egyptian nation, to please the gods, and to make sure that no offences were committed against divine law.

The nobles The nobles, who were frequently in charge of the **nomes**, or national regions, were hereditary families, often related to the Pharaoh himself, who customarily enriched themselves on tax collection, and high level administration.

The military and scribes These two diverse groups, who made up the 'white kilt class,' were equally powerful, the former because they could extort freely, the latter because they controlled writing and reading, rare skills in this almost totally uneducated peasant society.

Merchants and physicians These two classes of skilled middle-classes were the real professionals of the society, dominating trade and crafts, and practicing the healing arts.

Farmers The vast majority of the population consisted of farmers. Dependent on the regularity of Nile inundations, and hobbled by the heavy tax rates imposed on them by the tax-collector nobles, the farmers were often successful in amassing a large and rich harvest. Fruits and vegetables were abundant; wheat was turned into bread and beer; flax into linen and fine cloths; papyrus into paper.

Slaves We don't know the figures on the slave population of Egypt at different periods. It appears that this population was almost entirely made up of war prisoners, and that--in certain ways--this population had some control over their own destinies, some freedom, if they were lucky, to work themselves out of their condition.

Readings

Strouhal, Eugen, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, Norman, 1989.

McDowell, A.G., *Village Life in Ancient Egypt: Laundry Lists and Love Songs*, Oxford, 1900.

Discussion questions

How did this pyramidal structure change from age to age during the long three thousand years of Pharaonic rule? Can you indicate two or three periods of significant change, like that which occurred in the reign of Akhenaten?

Was there an intelligentsia among the ancient Egyptians? The Scribes? The artisans? The priests? Were there Universities? Med Schools?

Was the aristocracy (the nobles) a class relying on wealth for its position? Or was it a lineage based aristocracy, 'old families'?