

Egyptian Social History

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Part I : Egyptian social structure

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-classers 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'?

Part II : Egyptian gender relations

Overview Male power, in ancient societies, is a given: the patriarch is there from the beginning and stays there--til today, but the freedom and respect granted to women was noteworthy in ancient Egyptian culture. We can note a few aspects of this welcome state of affairs.

Marriage and family Ancient Egyptian sculpture abounds in depictions of husbands and wives standing side by side, holding hands. The guy is frequently a step or two ahead, and has the look of being in charge of things--but who knows, maybe he's not. We appreciate the uncertainty. There seems universal reverence, in the culture, for the wonders of the goddess Ma'at, who guarantees harmony and order in life.

Women and family power In many regards, within the family and out in the society, ancient Egyptian women enjoyed power. In the first place they were not railroaded into marriage, but customarily had full freedom in the choice of their marriage partners. (Pre nups were not rare, guaranteeing wives financial security in case of divorce, which was itself easily obtainable, and in which the woman could normally be represented by legal counsel. In the case of divorce, women had custody over children, as well as over their own property.)

Women and worldly power Out in the world, women were a normal part of the working society. They tended and marketed their own gardens, kept sheep and goats, or worked and sold in the markets for cloth, textiles, and (for example) beer, the drink for the man on the street. On a more elevated achievement level women were known as physicians, and scribes, the latter one of the society's most influential roles--as the scribe needed extensive training in order to be able to read and write. Women were an important part of the priesthood, which was itself influential on the highest levels of society. Tending the major temples--which were at the same time banks and lending agencies-- women exercised a role in government; as interpreters of dreams, and advisers to the highest officials, as well as placators of the always watching gods on whom the security of the state depended. In their priestly role women could on occasion rise to the level of God-wife, surrogate spouse of God. And then on the very highest levels women could be found serving in high diplomatic posts, or even as Pharaoh, as in the dramatic instance of Hatshepsut (1507-1458 B.C.E.), the fifth Pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty.

Observation Women are one half of society. When women are happy, men are happy, and the society has a leg up on succeeding. Egyptian society lasted intact for three millennia, not bad. We should be so lucky, in our advanced Western experimentation.

Readings

Tyldesley, Joyce, *Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1995.

Graves-Brown, Carolyn, *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt*, New York, 2010.

Discussion questions

Ancient Egyptian society, of course, was predominantly agricultural. Most women lived on the land. What kind of farm work did they perform? How did they balance farm work with taking care of children? Were there schools for their children?

How do you explain the difference between Fifth-century B.C. Athens and Egypt, in the issue of freedom for women? Wasn't there a brilliance of freedom and originality in the great Athenian century? Didn't it include women at all?

What jobs did priestesses perform, at the sacred temples of ancient Egypt? What does it mean that they were in charge of maintaining the statues of the god worshipped in their temple? What was a God-wife, and what did it mean to a priestess to become a God-wife?