

# ANCIENT EGYPT – Economic History

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## Contents

Part I : Economic Innovations

Part II : Trade

## ECONOMIC INNOVATIONS

**Overview** In dealing with Egyptian science, as distinct from Egyptian technological innovation, we looked briefly into broad developments in engineering, medicine, mining, agriculture and astronomy. (In these spheres of development the evolution of Egyptian culture, in its broadest and most definitive forms, was being promoted). Around this axis, of substantive scientific developments, blossomed a garden of technical innovations--in a broad sense the gadgets that accompany science achievement, and that 'make life better for people.' The Egyptians, a practical people, were eminently creative in the generation of such gadgets.

**Massive structures and living interiors** Apart from the massive engineering challenges, presented by pyramid construction, there were many practical challenges that had to be overcome in the course of building a huge limestone tomb. Basic tools like ramp and lever were employed in construction, to move enormous weights. (As well as to help transport the huge component blocks for distances of a hundred miles or more.) But it was not only the pyramids. The Lighthouse in the harbor of Alexandria, the Pharos, was often sited as a miracle of tall and effective monumental height, over one hundred meters. When it came to the *interior* appointments of such structures as pyramids, or of well-to-do domestic houses, the Egyptians acquired high skills of furniture making: beds and tables and stools. They proved equally proficient with those niceties of dwelling appointments--columns, lintels, sills, jambs, and veneers--which provided a high domestic comfort level, to those who could afford it. House construction itself, furthermore, was strengthened by the inclusion of clay-smearred reeds in walls and foundations. The security provided by this kind of innovation meant a great deal to the man in the street.

**Miscellaneous, and an observation** It is in the nature of technological innovations, like the above, that in the aggregate they do not display a single outstanding product, but rather a diversity of life-enhancing facilitators--like our own electric razors, I pods, or support hose, which tighten up sagging varicose veins. With energy and inventive ardor, the Egyptians found many new ways to medicate themselves, beautify their eyebrows, help themselves sleep well., orient themselves in time with a functional 365 day calendar and calculate by a decimal system.

## Readings

Scheel, Bernd, *Egyptian Metalmaking and Tools*, Haverfordwest, 1989.

Nicholson, Paul T.; Shaw, Ian, eds., *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge, 200;.

## Discussion questions

During which eras of their long imperial history were the Egyptians most prolific with inventions and discoveries? Please get into detail.

Was there any traditional training for scientists and inventors in ancient Egypt, or did they tend to learn by apprentice work and on the job experience? You might start by looking into the life of the legendary architect Imhotep, who was ultimately deified for his great skill.

## TRADE

**Overview** Ancient Egypt was vigorous in trade from Prehistoric times (6<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E.) through to the Roman Period in Egypt, in the first century B.C.E. A look at the map will suggest that trade, both by land and sea, was likely to have been both feasible and necessary--necessary because of the disproportionate amount of non arable desert land in Egypt.

**The earliest period** Records indicate imports of sheep and goats from Southwest Asia into prehistoric Egypt, as well as pottery from the country of Canaan. Already by the fourth millennium B.C.E. the Egyptian art of ship-building was developing rapidly, using planks and glued-together strips of papyrus. By the end of this pre-dynastic period the Kings of Egypt were closely supervising border crossings, where trade entered the country, and taking their share of taxable profits, on caravans entering Egypt from the desert.

**The Old Kingdom (2649-2150 B.C.E.)** The Old Kingdom, the first great period of pyramid construction and high social development, was marked by heavy activity along the trade routes which joined Egypt to Mesopotamia and to the Eastern Mediterranean by sea, and along the land routes leading south into Nubia and the Kingdom of Punt (probably Ethiopia). (A proto Suez Canal was in fact established across the northern desert, opening a new overland trade route as far as to the Red Sea.) From distant Afghanistan, lapis lazuli was imported regularly as a treasured adornment, while from Lebanon boatloads of cedars entered Egypt, bringing the favored material for the coffins of Pharaohs; for which commodities the Egyptians responded with heavily laden shipments of gold, silver, linen textiles. From farther south in Africa came tropical fruits, apes, monkeys, even a widely noted black dwarf, a touch of the exoticism for which the Egyptian taste grew rapidly.

**Organization of Trade** With the expansion of trade, in the last two millennia B.C.E., the Egyptian economy increasingly fell under governmental administrative control. By the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. the barter system, which had long dominated Egyptian trade practice, was seeing itself replaced with a standard currency, which facilitated international trading. The government took on itself the job of patrolling trade routes, assuring security for traders crossing unprotected desert tracts, and for constructing and protecting large granaries, where Egyptian farmers could store their harvests while awaiting shipment. It underscores the long enduring development of trading, in Egypt, that one lucrative job-role, throughout the major periods of Egyptian history, was that of bankrolling trading expeditions, a high stakes business venture which could win big, or prove costly if shiploads were pirated or caravans waylaid.

### Readings

Zvelebi, M. ed., *Hunters in Transition: Mesolithic Societies and the Transition to Farming*, Cambridge, 1986.

Bellwood, P., *First Farmers: The Origins of Agricultural Society*, Malden (Mass.), 2005.

### Discussion questions

What was the state of trade *within* Egypt? Was it as active as international trade? How did traded goods move within the country?

What kind of trading caravans did the Egyptians employ, to import and export across the Sahara desert? Were there 'authorized' trading routes, followed by all traders?

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. the Athenians traded many wine and oil products with Egypt, across the eastern Mediterranean. What did the Egyptians trade back to the Athenians in return?

The Egyptians were active exporters of paper to the Greeks and Romans, as early as 3000 B.C.E. Who were the main consumers of paper, in those cultures? What use did they make of paper? How was it distributed?