Egyptian Classes (8)

**Slaves and Servants**

The lowest class of Egyptian society, these workers were often foreigners. They worked in the household or in the fields. Slaves could be bought and sold like property. People could also sell themselves into slavery and buy themselves out of it. (ODYSSEY ONLINE)

Considerable numbers of people made their living as washermen and women, porters, maids, weavers and cooks. The tombs of the rich and famous are filled with images of servants, often named who accompany their mistress or master into the next life. Porters are often depicted very realistically – was this because the wealthy got to know their porters fairly well, as modern government officials might become friendly with their drivers, pilots, and bodyguards? Statues or reliefs showing hard work, such as tending fire while bread pots are prepared, are often sadly realistic and truly sympathetic. With bread and beer the staff of life for this world and the next, many women must have spent their lives grinding grain, brewing and baking. (ROM)

**Soldiers**

The Egyptian army was well organized and included infantry and chariot troops. The infantry, or foot soldiers, carried spears, shields, and battle axes. The chariot troops were archers and shot arrows from the platform of the chariot. During peace time, soldiers worked on government projects such as digging irrigation canals for farming, or transporting stone for the king’s tomb. (ODYSSEY ONLINE)

The military may have constituted a class. Son often followed father into the army. Opportunity, good luck, and courage could help a soldier rise in wealth and prestige. Because Kings were also war-leaders, a good soldier had a chance to catch the king’s attention, and improve his status; kings rewarded outstanding service with land, slaves, and prestigious posts. During the Age of the Pyramids, several soldiers left accounts of their rise in social status. Weni, who lived during the Sixth Dynasty, about 2340-2280, came from a noble family, but rose through the bureaucracy by leading a variety of successful expeditions. He left an account [of] a campaign in Palestine to overcome nomad[s]. He was an engineer, too, and took large workforces into the deserts to ease the transport of men and goods. He ended his career as Governor of Upper Egypt. In a long and interesting autobiography, he boasts of his relationship with the king, saying that he was “rooted in his heart.” King Teti showed his trust by asking Weni to hear a legal case, in secret, against one of his queens. (ROM)

**Merchants**

Egypt was one of the wealthiest countries in the ancient world. Egyptian merchants (actually, they were more like traders) carried products such as gold, papyrus made into writing paper or twisted into rope, linen cloth, and jewelry to other countries. In exchange, they brought back cedar and ebony wood, elephant tusks, panther skins, giraffe tails for fly whisks, and animals such as baboons and lions for the temples and palaces. (ODYSSEY ONLINE)

There are images in Old Kingdom tombs of people at markets, buying and selling. Commerce was carried on by barter; everything had to be traded for something of equal value. Weighing, measuring and counting were very important. Were there shopkeepers, people who make their living in trade? Or are these farmers’ markets, where people sold only what they themselves had made? Did anyone make a living exclusively by taking the goods from one town to the next, or was this something that only landowners could do?

International trade flourished in the King’s name. Sea-going vessels brought cedar, wine and oils from Lebanon. Ivory, gold, ostrich feathers and eggs, animal skins, rare minerals, beautiful stone and many other luxury goods came from the south, from the nations of Yam and Iryset in present-day Sudan. And from Punt, whose location is not yet known, came incense, myrrh, to sweeten the temples of the gods and the breath of men and women. Governors of Aswan, men like Heka-ib, put together enormous caravans with hundreds of donkeys to carry water and trade goods. Although this trade was carried on in the King’s name, and with his support, the men who lead such expeditions became very rich. (ROM)

**Artisans**

The Egyptian objects that we see in museums today were created by anonymous artists employed by the pharaoh, the government, or temples. Artists worked in large workshops rather than in individual studios as they often do today. Carpentry, metalwork, jewelry making, pottery, sculpture, wall painting, glass making, and weaving are some of the crafts they practiced. (ODYSSEY ONLINE)

“If you are poor, serve a man of worth,

That all your conduct may be well with the god.”

-Ptahhotep

Skilled craftsmen were responsible for creating and decorating temples, and the tombs and houses of the wealthy. They enjoyed many privileges, among them, the possibility of a proper burial. Artists who decorated the tombs of Nobles in the Old Kingdom sometimes include images of themselves, forever well-paid, competently serving those who commission their work.

Even though they were considered a step below the artists, other craftspeople such as carpenters and metalworkers formed a distinct class. People in these skilled trades may have had certain advantages because they had skills or products that they could exchange for other commodities, or services. At Giza, sculptors, painters, and carpenters have their own cemetery, which imitates, on a small scale, the tombs of the Great Ones. Scraps of stone leftover from building the great pyramids were used to make small pyramids and mastabas for the skills builders who spent their lives constructing the Wonders of the World.

It’s not always easy to understand the status of various professions. Nefer and Ka-hay, singers and musicians at court, were not nobles, were sufficiently prosperous to afford a very nice tomb in the Royal Cemetery. Hairdressers and manicurists could be very high status people if they worked at the royal court, and perhaps had the privilege of touching the sacred person of the King. Kiankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, who ran the Royal manicurists’ school, were also priests of a Sun Temple, and rich enough to build one of the finer tombs of the Fifth Dynasty. (ROM)

**Nobles/Aristocrats**

“A man of means – what is he like?

Your name is good, you are not maligned,

Your body is sleep, your face benign.”

-Ptahhotep

Old Kingdom Egyptian aristocracy consisted of local rulers and high officials. Their wealth came from their landholdings. Many would have been relatives of the royal family. Other families amassed powers and property in a particular area of Egypt through the efforts of individual members. Local rulers are called nomarchs. None of these people were expected to be idle.

“If you are mighty, gain respect through knowledge,

And through gentleness of speech.

Don’t command except as is fitting.”

-Ptahhotep

Aristocrats could marry into the royal family. Ankhnesmeryre I and II, daughters of a wealthy family from Abydos, both married King Pepy I, and each was the mother of a king. Their brother, Djau, served as vizier to his two nephews, Merenre and Pepy II. Members of this class could have expected, at the least, a good education, a “white kilt” career, and a proper burial – a beautiful home in the West – at the end. (ROM)

**Priests**

During the Age of the Pyramids, many high officials, scribes, and craftsmen held titles that expressed a connection between the tomb owner and temples or the cult of a god. Few people, however, were full-time ritual practitioners; one month in ten seems to have been the usual length of service. This means that a large percentage of those eligible or competent would be supported at some time by the revenues of the temples. All the temple personnel would share in the revenues. Most places sacred to the gods were rather small at this time, with the King’s mortuary temples being the largest temples, employing the greatest number of attendants.

During the month of service in a temple, a man might be a watchman, a doorkeeper, an accountant, hairdresser or physician. Caring for the statues of the gods by washing and dressing them also required servants of god. Many people claim, in their tomb, to have been ‘servants of the god’ – hem netjer. (ROM)

Because the pharaoh could not perform ceremonies at all the temples throughout Egypt, he appointed high priests to carry out the sacred rituals at each temple. Priests often passed down their positions from father to son. They enjoyed great power and wealth in Egyptian society. … Priests were often represented bald because they had to shave their heads to ensure cleanliness. (ODYSSEY ONLINE)

**Scribes**

Few skills were more important in Egypt than the ability to read and write. No illiterate could hold high office. Knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic made the scribe a person of importance, one who watched while others sweated in the sun. Scribes gave the orders which others obeyed. Most young men of the scribal class would become bureaucrats, working for the central government. Many positions seem to have been hereditary, so the sons of Metjetjy would have inherited some of his positions.

In the Age of the Pyramids, speaking and listening were also very important skills, even for the most important scribe or magistrate. Ptahhotep’s advice on this matter is still worth considering:

“Concentrate on excellence,

Your silence is better than chatter.

Speak when you know you have a solution. “

Unfortunately, we do now know what percentage of the population could read, nor if girls and women often learned to read and write. (ROM)

Eventually scribes made up an entire level of the bureaucracy. They must have had the only profession in the country whose members were aware of almost all that was going on in the empire. Personal letters, diplomatic communications, wills and other legal documents, official proclamations, tax records, administrative, economic, and religious documents, and so forth, all went through their hands.

Scribes were highly valued members of Egyptian society. They studied for many years to learn to read and write. Scribes had great opportunities as accountants, priests, doctors, and government officials of all sorts. One scribe, Horemhab, even became pharaoh! (ODYSSEY ONLINE)

**Farmers**

Peasant farmers worked lands belonging to the pharaoh, the government, a temple, or a rich landowner. Their pay barely covered their living expenses. In addition to plowing, planting, and harvesting, they maintained the irrigation canals brought water to their fields and were required to work on the pharaoh’s tomb construction project each year. (ODYSSEY ONLINE)