

social pyramid a pyramid outline showing the positions of social classes according to their status in society

social class a group in society that is ranked by factors such as wealth, property, and rights

status the position, or standing, of an individual compared to others in the same society

noble of high birth or rank

peasant a person who does farm work for wealthy landowners

1. Ancient Egypt's Social Pyramid

Egypt's society was structured like a pyramid and was based on an Egyptian principle called *ma'at*, which stressed the importance of truth, order, and balance. At the very top of this **social pyramid** was the pharaoh, Egypt's **supreme** ruler. Egyptian religion strengthened the pharaoh's authority. Because pharaohs were believed to be gods, their word was law.

Next in importance were several layers of **social classes**. The classes near the top of the pyramid had fewer people and enjoyed higher **status**, while those nearer the bottom had greater numbers of people but lower status.

Egypt's Social Classes Below the pharaoh were the next two highest classes in the social pyramid—government officials and priests. They were the most powerful groups in Egypt.

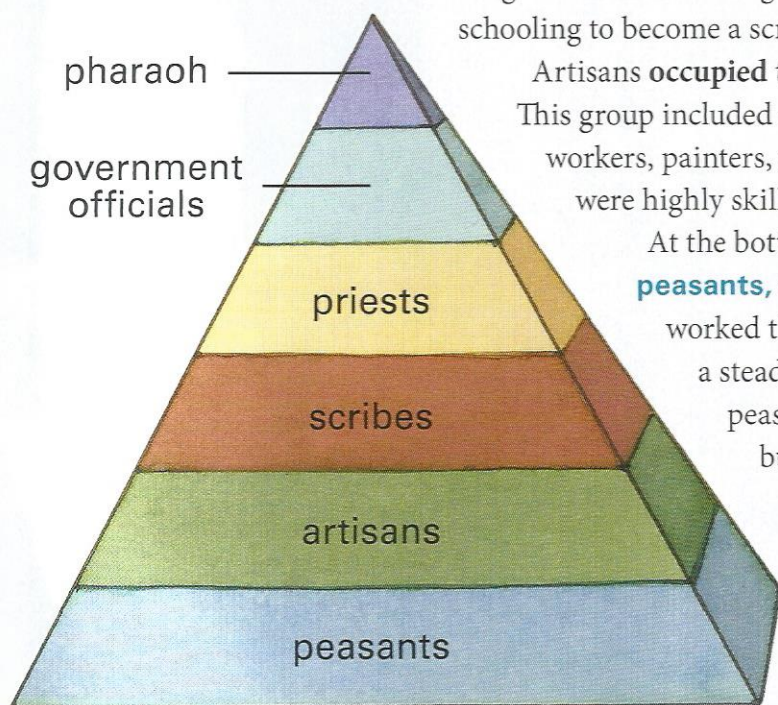
Government officials carried out the orders of the pharaoh. Most officials came from **noble** families. They were powerful and wealthy, and they enjoyed a high quality of life.

Priests were also a powerful group because religion touched every part of people's daily lives. Priests were responsible for the temples and religious rituals, as well as the elaborate ceremonies surrounding death and burial.

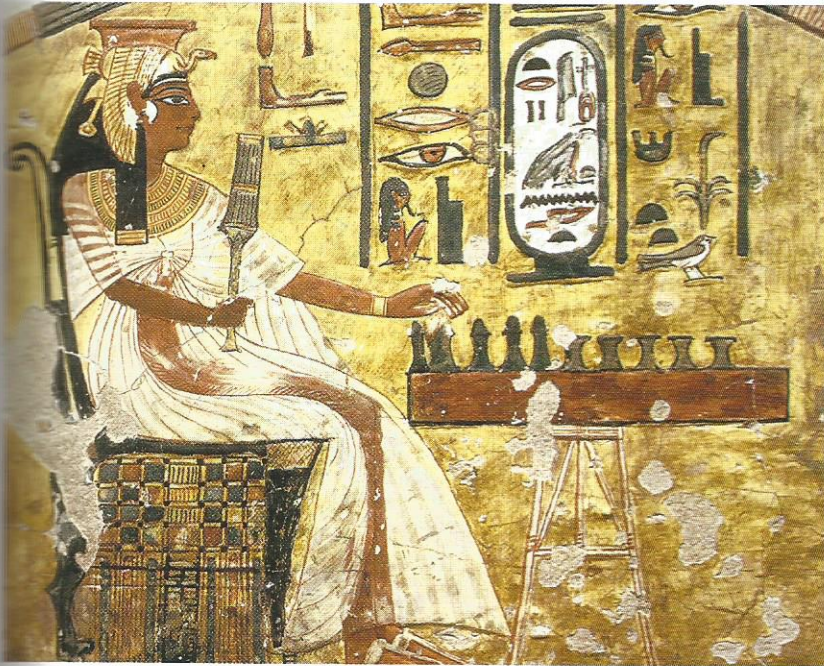
Next on the social pyramid were scribes. Scribes held a respected position in society because they recorded information for government and religious leaders. It took many years of schooling to become a scribe.

Artisans **occupied** the next layer of the social pyramid. This group included craftspeople like carpenters, metalworkers, painters, sculptors, and stone carvers. Artisans were highly skilled but had low social status.

At the bottom of the social pyramid were the **peasants**, the largest social class. Peasants worked the land, providing the Egyptians with a steady food supply. When not farming, peasants worked on the pharaoh's massive building projects.



Ancient Egyptian society was organized like a pyramid. The groups near the top had the most power and status.



Egyptian women enjoyed more freedom and rights than most women in the ancient world. A few women even became pharaohs.

Life in Egypt's Social Classes Egypt's social pyramid was fairly **rigid**. Since most people belonged to the same social class as their parents, there was little chance of improving their status. Members of different classes may have had some things in common, but, generally, their lives were quite different.

Egyptians in all social classes cherished family life. Most Egyptians married within their social group.

Men and women had different **roles** within the family. Men were the heads of their households and worked to support the family. Fathers often began to train their sons at a young age to continue their line of work. Women typically managed the home and raised the children. Upper-class women had servants or slaves to help them, but lower-class women did the work themselves.

Men were in charge of Egyptian society, but women enjoyed more freedom and rights than most women in the ancient world. They could own land, run businesses, and even ask for divorces and represent themselves in legal matters. Some women in the middle and upper classes worked as doctors, government officials, or priestesses. Both women and men enjoyed a better quality of life the higher they were on the social pyramid.

The Egyptians believed that their class system created a stable, well-ordered society. Each group had its own role to play. Let's investigate the duties and daily lives of the various social classes during the time of the New Kingdom.



This is a statue of Imhotep, who was an early and powerful vizier in ancient Egypt. Imhotep was famous for his role in designing and building great monuments.

2. Government Officials

Government officials belonged to the highest class on Egypt's social pyramid, after the pharaoh. Their job was to assist the pharaoh in his or her role as supreme ruler of Egypt.

Government officials were often members of the pharaoh's family or other upper-class families. Most of them inherited their positions from family members. However, trusted servants from the royal court sometimes rose to power.

Important Government Officials Three important officials were the vizier (vuh-ZEER), the chief treasurer, and the general of the armies. Each had his own duties.

The vizier had more power than anyone except the pharaoh. In addition to advising the pharaoh and carrying out his commands, the vizier appointed and supervised many of the other government officials.

The vizier also served as a kind of chief judge, with other judges bringing him their toughest cases. A vizier was expected to be fair and **neutral**, showing no special favor to either side in a dispute. One vizier gave this advice about being impartial, or not taking sides: "Regard one you know like one you don't know, one near you like one far from you." In works of art, viziers were often shown wearing white, the color of neutrality.

The chief treasurer oversaw the government's wealth. His main duty was to collect taxes. Because Egypt's economy was based on goods rather than money, people paid their taxes in grain, cows, cloth, and silver.

After the pharaoh, the top military commander in Egypt was the general of the armies. He advised the pharaoh in matters of war and national security, such as how to protect Egypt's borders from invaders. He also helped the pharaoh gain alliances with other kingdoms.

Lives of Luxury High government officials led lives of luxury. Most were nobles who had great wealth, fine homes, and plenty of time to socialize.

The lavish banquets enjoyed by these wealthy Egyptians illustrate their grand lifestyle. Hosts took pride in the meal. Cooks might roast duck, goose, pigeon, quail, antelope, sheep, and goat. Dishes were piled high with special delicacies that might include figs, dates, grapes, and coconuts. A variety of breads and cakes and honey completed the feast.

Guests at banquets dressed in fine linen clothing. Both men and women wore perfume, and women often wore ropes of beads as jewelry, painted their nails, lined their eyes with makeup, and used lipstick.

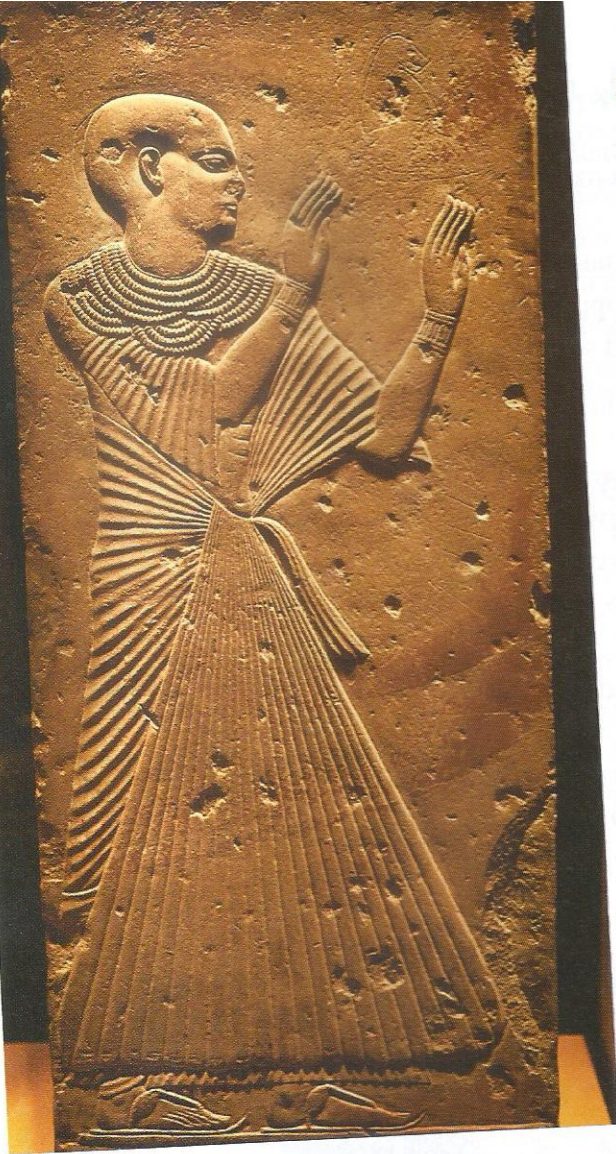
At the start of a banquet, it was customary for guests to offer the host lengthy blessings, such as wealth, great happiness, a long life, and good health. The host often responded simply with "Welcome, welcome," or "Bread and beer," as a way of saying, "Come and eat!"

The feast began with men and women taking their seats on opposite sides of the room. Important guests were given chairs with high backs, while everyone else sat on stools or cushions. Servants, mostly women, waited on the guests. There were no utensils, so people ate with their fingers.

While the guests enjoyed their meals, musicians, dancers, and acrobats provided entertainment. Musicians, usually women, played flutes, harps, rattles, and lutes (guitarlike instruments). Guests often clapped along with the music, making these banquets very loud and joyous occasions.

These women of high social class enjoy a banquet. Notice the elaborate and decorative jewelry they are wearing.





Priests shaved their heads as one of many steps in achieving religious purity. Wearing linen clothing also helped Egyptian priests maintain their cleanliness.

afterlife an existence after death

3. Priests

Like government officials, priests were powerful and highly respected in society. A large network of priests served under the pharaoh, who was considered the highest-ranked priest of all.

The Duties of Priests Priests had different jobs. While the High Priest advised the pharaoh and oversaw all religious ceremonies, temple priests were in charge of the temples scattered throughout Egypt. Other priests handled more common concerns and requests, such as giving advice and performing healings.

Women were allowed to be priestesses in Egypt and were generally regarded as equal to male priests. Their main duty was to oversee temples that were devoted to music and dancing.

Temple priests played an extremely important role in Egyptian religion. Every temple was home to one or more Egyptian gods. A temple priest's primary job was to take care of his or her temple's special god in a variety of ways.

A temple's god was thought to live in a statue that was housed in a holy room called a sanctuary. Only a priest who was purified, or cleansed, could enter the sanctuary. There were

many requirements for a priest to be purified, one of which was to avoid certain foods, such as fish, that were associated with the lower classes. Additionally, priests had to cleanse their bodies by bathing in holy pools three or four times a day. They also had to shave off their body hair. Because animal products like leather and wool were considered unclean, priests could only wear clothes made of linen cloth. Once purified, a priest could perform his sacred duties.

The Priests' Role in Burial Practices Priests had a special role to play in burial practices. Egyptians believed in a life after death. Since Egyptians thought that in the **afterlife** a person's body remained with his or her dead spirit, they used a method called embalming to preserve bodies from decay. Priests oversaw this sacred ritual.

The embalming process had many steps. First, the embalmers removed the body's organs, such as the brain, lungs, and liver. They used hooks to extract the brain through the nostrils. Only the heart remained in the body, for Egyptians believed that the gods used the heart to judge a dead person's soul.

Next, the organs were preserved in jars. A special salt called natron was applied to the organs and body that dried them out.

After about 70 days, the embalmers washed and oiled the body before wrapping it in hundreds of yards of linen. The embalmers decorated the wrapped body, or mummy, with pieces of jewelry and protective charms, and often placed a mask over the head. Finally, they spread a black, gooey gum over the body and wrapped it a final time.

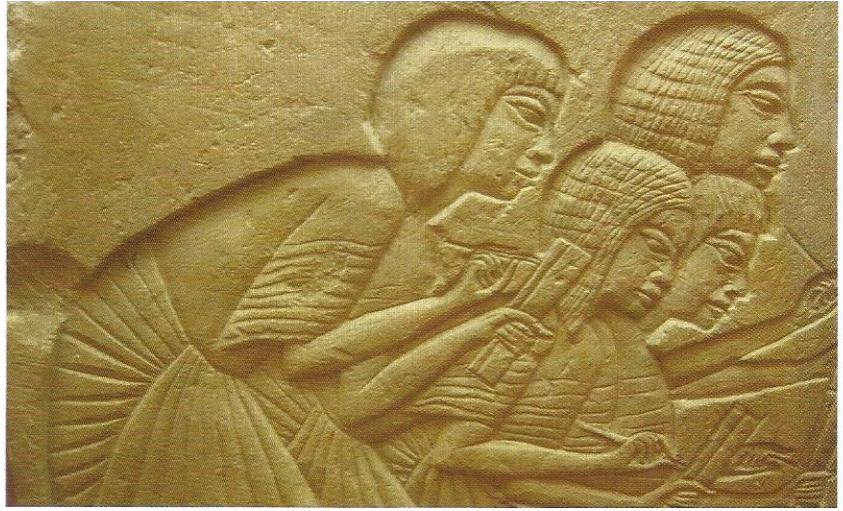
The mummy was finally prepared for burial. First, it was placed in a wooden box, which was then stored inside a large stone coffin called a sarcophagus. Because the ancient Egyptians believed that the afterlife was similar to life in this world, they buried other items along with the box or coffin, including food and drink, furniture, statues, jewelry, gold, clothes, games, and mirrors.

Not all Egyptians could afford such complicated burials. However, even poor Egyptians wrapped their dead in cloth and buried them with loaves of bread and other items they thought would be needed in the afterlife.



The Egyptian process of embalming a body produced a mummy, like the one shown here. This process preserves the dead person's body quite well.

This engraving shows students in a scribe school, working at their writing. Beginning at age 5, students often spent all day working to become skilled scribes.



4. Scribes

In the social pyramid, scribes, Egypt's official writers and record keepers, were one level below priests. They were highly respected and well paid. Most scribes worked for the government, while others worked for priests or nobles.

Only men were allowed to be scribes, but they came from all classes of society. Becoming a scribe was one of the few ways that men could rise above their parents' social class.

Scribe Schools Boys who wanted to become scribes had to attend scribe schools run by priests. Most students came from artisan or merchant families, and very few came from the peasant class.

Starting around the age of five, students typically spent 12 years or more learning **hieroglyphs**, the symbols used in the Egyptian system of writing. Because this writing system was quite complicated, most students first mastered a simpler form of writing before progressing to hieroglyphs.

Students were required to memorize over 700 hieroglyphs. They spent as many as four years repeatedly copying the signs. They practiced their writing on pieces of wood, flakes of stone, and even broken bits of pottery. As their skills improved, students were permitted to write on papyrus, a type of paper made from the papyrus plant. Egyptians preferred writing on papyrus more than on clay tablets, which were used in Mesopotamian culture.

Students in scribe schools did not have an easy life since classes sometimes lasted from dawn until sunset. Teachers were strict and often treated their students harshly, punishing them for being lazy or distracted. Beatings were common. One stern schoolmaster wrote, "A youngster's ear is on his back; he only listens to the man who beats him."

hieroglyph a symbol used in hieroglyphics, a system of writing developed around 3000 B.C.E.

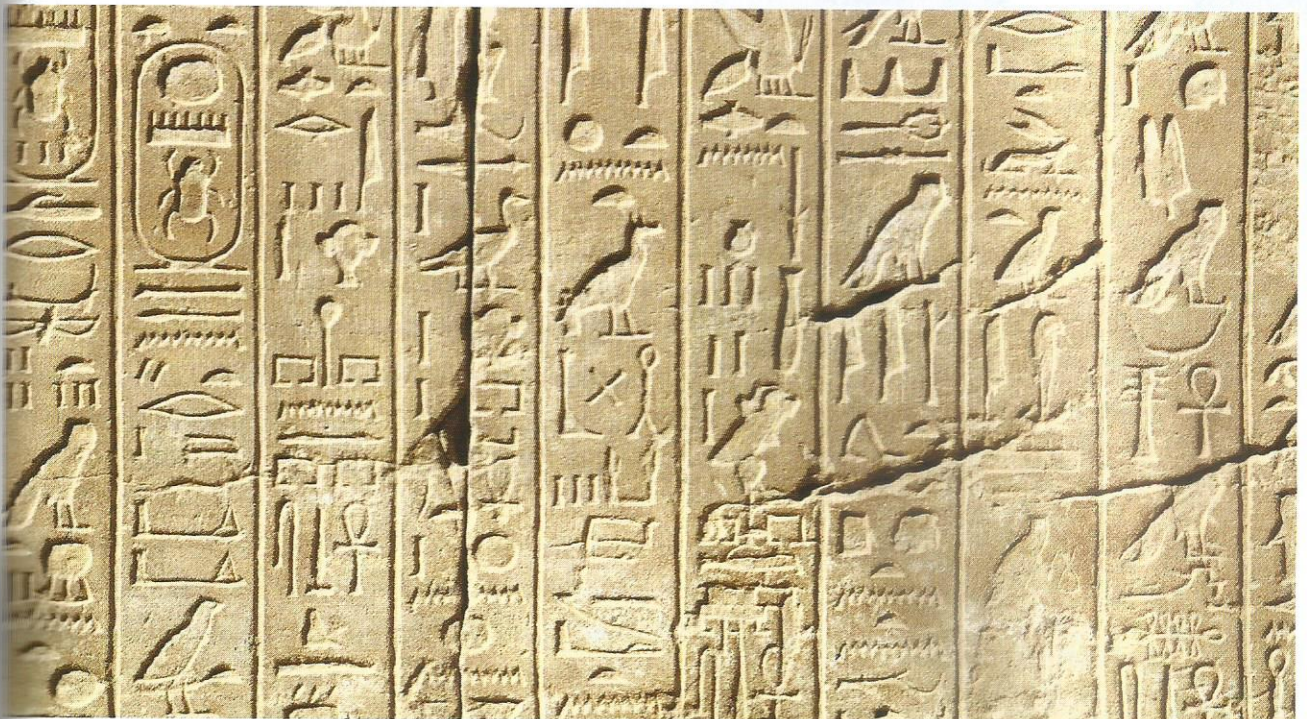
The Work of the Scribes Ancient Egyptians kept all kinds of records, so scribes held a wide variety of jobs. They recorded accounts of the grain and food supply and even documented the results of the government census, which reported the size of Egypt's population. Some scribes calculated and collected taxes. Legal scribes recorded court cases and helped enforce laws, while military scribes kept track of the army's soldiers and food supply, and the number of enemies killed in battle.

Every scribe used the same tools. For pens, a scribe used finely sharpened reeds. For paper, he used a sheet of papyrus laid on a writing tablet. Made of wood or stone, each tablet contained two wells, one for black ink and one for red. A small container held water that was used to wet the ink.

A scribe carried his tools with him wherever he traveled. His tablet hung from a cord slung over his shoulder. Attached to the tablet were leather bags and cases that contained his other tools.

Additionally, scribes carried rolls of paper made from papyrus, a remarkable Egyptian invention. The Egyptians made paper by first cutting the inner part of the papyrus plant into strips. These strips were soaked in water for several days until they were soft. The soft strips were laid out in a crisscross pattern, and then pressed between two sheets of cloth until they absorbed all the water. Finally, the papyrus strips were pressed one more time to form a sheet of paper.

Hieroglyphs were the symbols used in the Egyptian writing system. What kinds of images do you recognize? What do you think those symbols meant?



5. Artisans

Below the scribes on the social pyramid were the artisans, Egypt's highly skilled laborers who created some of the most beautiful art objects in the ancient world. Yet, unlike scribes, they rarely got respect from higher classes. Only the few who became masters at their craft were sometimes honored for their work.

Types of Artisans Artisans specialized in any one of a number of crafts. Workers in this class included carpenters, jewelers, leatherworkers, metalworkers, painters, potters, sculptors, and weavers. Artisans made many beautiful objects, including stunning jewelry and elegant furniture. Painters portrayed scenes of Egyptian daily life. Most artisans were men, but some women wove fabric, beaded clothing, and made perfume.

The most skilled artisans were the stone carvers. They produced the statues, engravings, and reliefs found in Egyptian temples, tombs, and monuments.

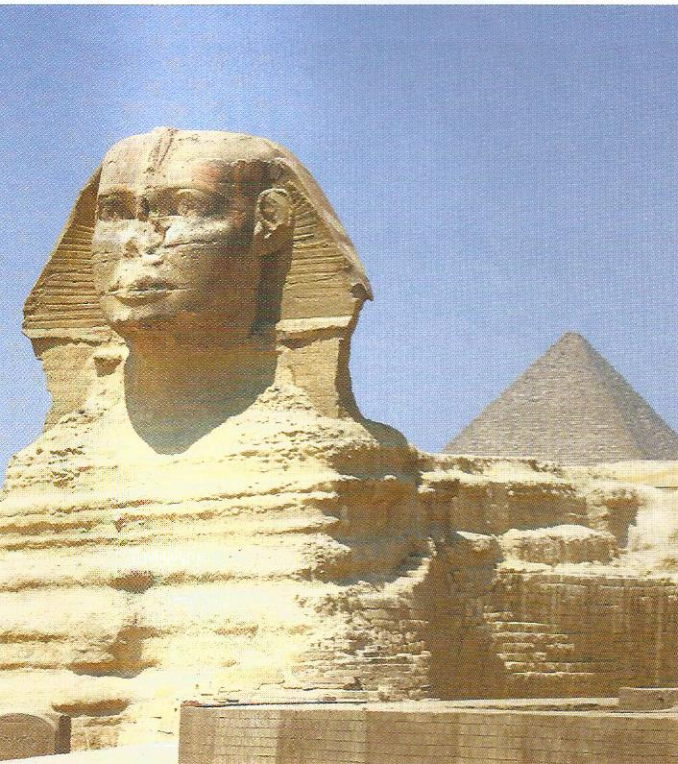
Stone carvers played a crucial role in tomb building. The belief in an afterlife inspired wealthy Egyptians to order elaborate tombs for themselves. Stone carvers helped equip the tombs with artworks to honor and preserve the dead. Artworks might include statues of the deceased, highly detailed wall engravings, and stone coffins.

Stone carving was demanding and time-consuming work. Carvers often worked with hard rock, such as granite. They used dolerite, another type of hard rock, to pound out an **initial** shape. Next, they refined the shape and carved in details, using stone tools and copper chisels. Then, they used quartz sand to smooth and polish the object. Painters often added color to the finished product.

The Daily Life and Work of Artisans

Artisans were a class toward the lower middle of society and lived with their families in modest homes. Their houses were usually rectangular and barely 10 yards long. Three rooms stretched from front to back, the first of which was used as a workroom or to house animals. The living room came next. The final room was divided into a kitchen and a bedroom. The roof was sometimes used as another place to work or sleep.

Stone carvers were some of the most skilled workers in the artisan class. These Egyptian artisans created the Sphinx of Giza, which still stands near the Great Pyramid.





Artisans typically worked alongside one another in big workshops, often working for ten consecutive days before taking time off. The workers depended entirely on their employers for food. In hard times, when food was in short supply, artisans often went hungry.

Pharaohs called upon hundreds of artisans at once to work on royal projects. Artisans created the fine artwork that covered temples, royal tombs, and other monuments. They worked in large groups to complete engravings, paintings, and hieroglyphics.

Despite artisans' skill and creativity, the upper classes often viewed them as little more than common laborers. Even the most talented artists were rarely allowed to sign their work, but some artists did receive recognition. Employers sometimes threw a banquet for their favorite artist. Occasionally, they honored an artist by allowing him to portray himself in a painting or an engraving.

This painting shows different types of artisans at work. Look carefully. Can you find the artisans using stone tools and copper chisels?

6. Peasants

Peasants made up the lowest and largest class in Egypt's social pyramid. Although Egyptian society depended on their work, they were generally considered unskilled workers. Peasants grew the crops that supplied everyone with food. When not busy working the fields, peasants helped build monuments like the pyramids.

The Three Seasons of the Nile Peasant life revolved around the Nile River. Its three seasons were the flooding season, the planting season, and the harvest season.

The flooding season lasted from June to September. During this time, the Nile overflowed its banks and fertilized the fields. Farmers had to wait for the waters to reduce before they could work the fields. Meanwhile, they labored on royal projects, such as building pyramids and temples.

In October, the planting season began, and farmers sowed their fields with seeds. The most significant crops were wheat and barley, which were used to make bread.

Peasants worked in pairs to sow the fields. The farmer softened the earth with a plow pulled by cattle, while a second person, often the farmer's wife, followed behind to scatter the seeds. Throughout the season, farmers carefully irrigated the land.

The harvest season began in March. Usually the farmer's entire family helped with the harvest. The men cut down the plants with sickles (metal blades with short wooden handles), and the women and children gathered the tall stalks of grain.

During harvest time, everyone worked from dawn to dusk. Peasants often sang songs to make the long hours of labor pass more quickly. Occasionally, musicians played in the fields while the workers sang.

The Daily Lives of Peasants Peasants had the fewest comforts of any of the social classes. They lived in plain houses that were made of mud bricks and filled sparsely with furniture, often just woven mats.



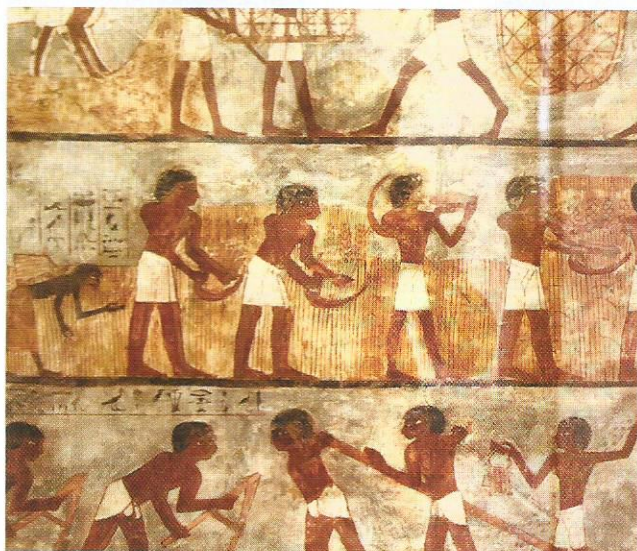
This engraving shows a young peasant with his cow. Peasants worked hard to supply Egyptians with food.

Additionally, the peasants' diet was simple. A typical daily meal might consist of onions, cucumbers, fish, and homemade bread. Peas and lentils were also common. Unlike the upper classes, peasants rarely ate meat. In times of famine, they often had to boil tough papyrus plants for food.

Peasants spent most of their lives working but did have some time for recreation. Men enjoyed a river game that involved knocking each other off papyrus rafts. Holidays were celebrated before planting and after the crops were harvested. Peasants also participated in festivals held to honor the Egyptian gods.

A highlight of the year for peasants was the end of the harvest season. As a reward for their hard work, they were allowed to collect and keep any leftover grain.

But farmers could also be punished for a poor harvest since they had to pay taxes in the form of crops. If a harvest did not produce enough to pay the required tax, a farmer might be brutally beaten.



This painting shows peasants cutting and gathering the wheat harvest. Peasants looked forward to the festivals after a successful harvest.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned about Egypt's social pyramid. Their social class determined the daily life of ancient Egyptians.

Government Officials This was the highest social class after the pharaoh. Many officials were nobles who inherited their jobs, but some rose to power. Three key officials were the vizier, the chief treasurer, and the general of the armies.

Priests Priests were powerful and respected. They advised the pharaoh, oversaw religious ceremonies, took care of temple gods, and prepared bodies for the afterlife.

Scribes Scribes were Egypt's official writers and record keepers. They were well paid and respected. They trained for many years in special schools to learn hieroglyphs, Egypt's writing symbols. Boys from several social classes could become scribes.

Artisans These highly skilled laborers created beautiful objects but got little respect. Stone carvers were among the most skilled and important artisans.

Peasants This lowest and largest social class grew crops that supplied food and also helped build monuments such as the pyramids. Peasants' lives revolved around the three seasons of the Nile River.