

Ancient Egyptian Social Structure

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TOP: The ancient Egyptian goddess Isis portrayed in a tomb painting around 1360 B.C. BOTTOM: A pyramid chart shows the social structure of ancient Egypt.

Egyptian society was structured like a pyramid. At the top were the gods, such as Ra, Osiris and Isis. Ra was the god of the sun, and the king of all gods, until Osiris took over. Osiris was the god of the underworld and the afterlife. Isis was the wife and sister of Osiris and the goddess of magic, marriage, healing and protection. Egyptians believed that the gods controlled the universe. Therefore, it was important to keep them happy. They could make the Nile overflow, cause famine or even bring death.

The Egyptians also elevated some human beings to gods. Their leaders, called pharaohs, were believed to be gods in human form and were believed to possess the secrets of heaven and earth. The pharaohs were believed to be manifestations of the falcon-headed god of the sky and war, Horus (son of Isis and Osiris), during their lives, and then becoming the god Osiris when they died and were united with the other gods. The pharaohs had absolute power over their subjects. After pharaohs died, huge stone pyramids were built as their tombs. Pharaohs were buried in chambers within the pyramids along with everything they would need in the afterlife.

Because the people of Egypt believed that their pharaohs were gods, they entrusted their rulers with many responsibilities. Protection was at the top of the list. The pharaoh directed the army in case of a foreign threat or an internal conflict. Pharaohs often led foreign campaigns to places like Nubia and Libya to add to Egypt's economic prosperity. All laws were enacted at the discretion of the pharaoh. Each farmer paid taxes in the form of grain, which was stored in the pharaoh's warehouses. This grain was used to feed the people in the event of a famine.

The chain of command

No single person could manage all these duties without assistance. The pharaoh appointed a chief minister called a vizier as a supervisor. The vizier ensured that taxes were collected.

Working with the vizier were scribes who kept government records. These high-level employees had mastered a rare skill in ancient Egypt — they could read and write.

Noble aims

Right below the pharaoh in status were powerful nobles and priests. Only nobles could hold government posts; in these positions they profited from tributes paid to the pharaoh. Priests were responsible for pleasing the gods.

Nobles enjoyed great status and also grew wealthy from donations to the gods. All Egyptians — from pharaohs to farmers — gave gifts to the gods.

Soldier on

Soldiers fought in wars or quelled domestic uprisings. During long periods of peace, soldiers also supervised the peasants, farmers and slaves who were involved in building such structures as pyramids and palaces.

Skilled workers such as physicians and craftspersons made up the middle class. Craftspersons made and sold jewelry, pottery, papyrus products, tools and other useful things.

Naturally, there were people needed to buy goods from artisans and traders. These were the merchants and storekeepers who sold these goods to the public.

The bottom of the heap

At the bottom of the social structure were slaves and farmers. Slavery became the fate of those captured as prisoners of war. In addition to being forced to work on building projects, slaves toiled at the discretion of the pharaoh or nobles.

Farmers tended the fields, raised animals, kept canals and reservoirs in good order, worked in the stone quarries and built the royal monuments. Farmers paid taxes that could be as much as 60 percent of their yearly harvest — that's a lot of hay!

Social mobility was not impossible. A small number of peasants and farmers could get ahead in life and move higher up the social pyramid. Families saved money to send their sons to schools to learn how to do certain jobs. These schools were run by priests or by artisans. Boys who learned to read and write could become scribes, then go on to gain employment in the government. It was possible for a boy born on a farm to work his way up into the higher ranks of the government. Government jobs could make an Egyptian rich.

Rights of women

Women in ancient Egypt could be rulers like Cleopatra or Hatshepsut. Women rulers did not claim to be Horus, though. Cleopatra said she was the reincarnation of the Egyptian goddess Isis. Hatshepsut claimed to be the daughter of the god Amun, the most popular and powerful god of the time.

But what about the common folk? A woman's role as mother and wife still came first in Egyptian society. Some professions in which women worked included weaving, perfume making and entertainment.

Egyptian women could have their own businesses, own and sell property and serve as witnesses in court cases. Unlike most women in the Middle East, they were even permitted to be in the company of men. They could escape bad marriages by divorcing and remarrying. And women were entitled to one-third of the property their husbands owned. The rights Egyptian women enjoyed made them the most liberated females of their time.

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

Egyptian society was structured like a pyramid.

Which of the following words, if it replaced the word "structured," would CHANGE the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) guarded
 - (B) arranged
 - (C) organized
 - (D) composed
- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "The bottom of the heap."

At the bottom of the social structure were slaves and farmers. Slavery became the fate of those captured as prisoners of war. In addition to being forced to work on building projects, slaves toiled at the discretion of the pharaoh or nobles.

Which of the following phrases from the paragraph helps you understand the meaning of the word "toil"?

- (A) the social structure
 - (B) became the fate
 - (C) forced to work
 - (D) pharaoh or nobles
- 3 How does the following sentence from the section "Noble aims" contribute to the article?

All Egyptians — from pharaohs to farmers — gave gifts to the gods.

- (A) It reinforces the importance of the gods throughout the Egyptian social structure.
- (B) It shows that pharaohs and farmers had equal power in the Egyptian social structure.
- (C) It highlights the importance of strong leadership in Egyptian society.
- (D) It highlights the superiority of pharaohs in all aspects of Egyptian society.

4 Fill in the blank in the sentence below.

In the final section, "Rights of women," the author ____.

- (A) highlights problems faced by Egyptian leaders who were women
- (B) explains that women across Egyptian society had many rights
- (C) contrasts professions for Egyptian women with those for men
- (D) outlines the causes and effects of Egyptian women's right to divorce