

OVERVIEW OF LIFE AND CIVILIZATION IN ANCIENT EGYPT



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Sources of ancient Egyptian history

Sources of ancient Egyptian history are either documentary or classical

A. THE DOCUMENTARY SOURCES:

These include tables giving the names of the kings. Written in order and the many inscribed monuments found everywhere in Egypt. The most important tables are the following:

Palermo stone: this gives a list of the kings of upper and lowers united Egypt from before the first dynasty until the middle of the fifth dynasty together with the important events or annals including the height of the Nile year by year. The main piece of which is preserved in Palermo museum with another piece in Cairo museum.

list of Saqqara : this gives the names of 47 kings beginning with Ad jib of the first dynasty and ending with Ramses II.

Turin papyrus: this papyrus contains a list of kings ending with those of the Nineteenth dynasty, the number of years of the reign of each king , and summaries at the end of certain periods. A papyrus written in hieratic script.

List of Abydos : in the temple of Sati I , a table on the walls gives the names of 76 kings beginning with Menes of the first dynasty , and ending with Sati I the third king of the Nineteenth dynasty and Ramses II.

list of Karnack : this is now in Paris , and it originally gave the names of 62 kings.

B. THE CLASSICAL SOURCES:

Many books on Egypt were compiled by ancient writers , the most important of whom are :

HERODOTUS: A Greek historian who visited Egypt about 450 B.C. and wandered all over the country, asking the priests about its history and religion. He devoted the second volume of his <Histories> to Egypt. He, however, add some personal observations and allowed in his book for many inaccuracies.

MANETHO: An Egyptian priest of the Ptolemaic period <about 300B.c.> originally from samannud. He wrote in Greek , by order of king Ptolemy the secant , three (Egyptian Memoires) in which he

grouped the kings, from Menes to Nectanebo the secant into 30 dynasties which correspond to the various royal houses that ruled Egypt successively. Menthol s works are lost, but fragments of them have preserved by Josephus , busbies and others. Eusebius gives a list of the Egyptian dynasties, stating the length of reign of every king.

Introduction to ancient Egyptian civilization

Ancient Egypt can be thought of as an oasis in the desert of northeastern Africa, dependent on the annual inundation of the Nile River to support its agricultural population. The country's chief wealth came from the fertile floodplain of the Nile valley, where the river flows between bands of limestone hills, and the Nile delta, in which it fans into several branches north of present-day Cairo. Between the floodplain and the hills is a variable band of low desert that supported a certain amount of game. The Nile was Egypt's sole transportation artery.

The First Cataract at Aswan, where the riverbed is turned into rapids by a belt of granite, was the country's only well-defined boundary within a populated area. To the south lay the far less hospitable area of Nubia, in which the river flowed through low sandstone hills that in most regions left only a very narrow strip of cultivable land. Nubia was significant for Egypt's periodic southward expansion and for access to products from farther south. West of the Nile was the arid Sahara, broken by a chain of oases some 125 to 185 miles (200 to 300 km) from the river and lacking in all other resources except for a few minerals. The eastern desert, between the Nile and the Red Sea, was more important, for it supported a small nomadic population and desert game, contained numerous mineral deposits, including gold, and was the route to the Red Sea.

To the northeast was the Isthmus of Suez. It offered the principal route for contact with Sinai, from which came turquoise and possibly copper, and with southwestern Asia, Egypt's most important area of cultural interaction, from which were received stimuli for technical development



and cultivars for crops. Immigrants and ultimately invaders crossed the isthmus into Egypt, attracted by the country's stability and prosperity. From the late 2nd millennium bc onward, numerous attacks were made by land and sea along the eastern Mediterranean coast.

At first, relatively little cultural contact came by way of the Mediterranean Sea, but from an early date Egypt maintained trading relations with the Lebanese port of Byblos (present-day Jbail). Egypt needed few imports to maintain basic standards of living, but good timber was essential and not available within the country, so it usually was obtained from Lebanon. Minerals such as obsidian and lapis lazuli were imported from as far afield as Anatolia and Afghanistan.

Agriculture centred on the cultivation of cereal crops, chiefly emmer wheat (**Triticum dicoccum**) and barley (**Hordeum vulgare**). The fertility of the land and general predictability of the inundation ensured very high productivity from a single annual crop. This productivity made it possible to store large surpluses against crop failures and also formed the chief basis of Egyptian wealth, which was, until the creation of the large empires of the 1st millennium bc, the greatest of any state in the ancient Middle East.

Cattle may have been domesticated in northeastern Africa. The Egyptians kept many as draft animals and for their various products, showing some of the interest in breeds and individuals that is found to this day in the Sudan and eastern Africa. The donkey, which was the principal transport animal (the camel did not become common until Roman times), was probably domesticated in the region. The native Egyptian breed of sheep became extinct in the 2nd millennium bc and was replaced by an Asiatic breed. Sheep were primarily a source of meat; their wool was rarely used. Goats were more numerous than sheep. Pigs were also raised and eaten. Ducks and geese were kept for food, and many of the vast numbers of wild and migratory birds found in Egypt were hunted and trapped. Desert game, principally various species of antelope and ibex, were hunted by the elite; it was a royal privilege to hunt lions and wild cattle. Pets included dogs, which were also used for hunting, cats (domesticated in Egypt), and monkeys. In addition, the Egyptians had a great interest in, and knowledge of, most species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish in their environment.

Nearly all of the people were engaged in agriculture and were probably tied to the land. In theory all the land belonged to the king, although in practice those living on it could not easily be removed and some categories of land could be bought and sold. Land was assigned to high officials to provide them with an income, and most tracts required payment of substantial dues to the state, which had a strong interest in keeping the land in agricultural use. Abandoned land was taken back into state ownership and reassigned for cultivation. The people who lived on and worked the land were not free to leave and were obliged to work it, but they were not slaves; most paid a proportion of their produce to major officials. Free citizens who worked the land on their own behalf did emerge; terms applied to them tended originally to refer to poor people, but these agriculturalists were probably not poor. Slavery was never common, being restricted to captives and foreigners or to people who were forced by poverty or debt to sell themselves into service. Slaves sometimes even married members of their owners' families, so that in the long term those belonging to households tended to be assimilated into free society. In the New Kingdom (from about 1539 to 1075 bc), large numbers of captive slaves were acquired by major state institutions or incorporated into the army. Punitive treatment of foreign slaves or of native fugitives from their obligations included forced labour, exile (in, for example, the oases of the western desert), or compulsory enlistment in dangerous mining expeditions. Even nonpunitive employment such as quarrying in the desert was hazardous. The official record of one expedition shows a mortality rate of more than 10 percent.

Just as the Egyptians optimized agricultural production with simple means, their crafts and techniques, many of which originally came from Asia, were raised to extraordinary levels of perfection. The Egyptians' most striking technical achievement, massive stone building, also exploited the potential of a centralized state to mobilize a huge labour force, which was made available by efficient agricultural practices. Some of the technical and organizational skills involved were remarkable. The construction of the great pyramids of the 4th dynasty (c. 2575–c. 2465 bc) has yet to be fully explained and would be a major challenge to this day. This expenditure of skill contrasts with sparse evidence of an essentially neolithic way of living for the rural population of the time, while the use of flint tools persisted



even in urban environments at least until the late 2nd millennium bc. Metal was correspondingly scarce, much of it being used for prestige rather than everyday purposes.

In urban and elite contexts, the Egyptian ideal was the nuclear family, but, on the land and even within the central ruling group, there is evidence for extended families. Egyptians were monogamous, and the choice of partners in marriage, for which no formal ceremony or legal sanction is known, did not follow a set pattern. Consanguineous marriage was not practiced during the Dynastic period, except for the occasional marriage of a brother and sister within the royal family, and that practice may have been open only to kings or heirs to the throne. Divorce was in theory easy, but it was costly. Women had a legal status only marginally inferior to that of men. They could own and dispose of property in their own right, and they could initiate divorce and other legal proceedings. They hardly ever held administrative office but increasingly were involved in religious cults as priestesses or “chantresses.” Married women held the title “mistress of the house,” the precise significance of which is unknown. Lower down the social scale, they probably worked on the land as well as in the house.

The uneven distribution of wealth, labour, and technology was related to the only partly urban character of society, especially in the 3rd millennium bc. The country’s resources were not fed into numerous provincial towns but instead were concentrated to great effect around the capital—itsself a dispersed string of settlements rather than a city—and focused on the central figure in society, the king. In the 3rd and early 2nd millennia, the elite ideal, expressed in the decoration of private tombs, was manorial and rural. Not until much later did Egyptians develop a more pronouncedly urban character

Part of Daily Life

To understand the everyday life of ancient Egyptians, archaeologists draw on many sources. The most valuable sources include tomb paintings, reliefs, and the objects included in tombs that the Egyptians used in their daily life. Artifacts from the few towns that have been excavated and hundreds of documents written by the ancient Egyptians shed additional light on their life. Much of the day-to-day running of their households, however, remains obscure.

The nuclear family was the fundamental social unit of ancient Egypt. The father was responsible for the economic well-being of the family, and the mother supervised the household and cared for the upbringing of the children. Although Egyptian children had toys and are occasionally depicted at play, much of their time was spent preparing for adulthood. For example, peasant children accompanied their parents into the fields; the male offspring of craftsmen often served as apprentices to their fathers. Privileged children sometimes received formal education to become scribes or army officers.

The few furnishings in the ancient Egyptian home were simple in design. The most common piece of furniture was a low stool, used by all Egyptians including the pharaoh. These stools were made from wood, had leather or woven rush seats, and had three or four legs. Most kitchens were equipped with a cylindrical, baked clay stove for cooking. Food was stored in wheel-made pottery. The basic cooking equipment was a two-handled pottery saucepan.

The ancient Egyptians embellished their usually plain clothing with elaborate costume jewelry. Both men and women wore jewelry such as earrings, bracelets, anklets, rings, and beaded necklaces. They incorporated into their jewelry many minerals including amethyst, garnet, jasper, onyx, turquoise, and lapis lazuli, as well as copper, gold, and shells. Because the Egyptians were very superstitious, frequently their jewelry contained good luck charms called amulets.

Cosmetics were not only an important part of Egyptian dress but also a matter of personal hygiene and health. Many items related to cosmetics have been found in tombs and are illustrated in tomb paintings. Oils and creams were of vital importance against the hot Egyptian sun and dry winds. Eye paint, both green and black, is probably the most characteristic of the Egyptian cosmetics. The green pigment, malachite, was made from copper. The black paint, called kohl, was made from lead or soot. Kohl was usually kept in a small pot that had a flat bottom, wide rim, tiny mouth, and a flat, disk-shaped lid.

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