

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.

People in Egypt looked at each other in a certain order. The order was set up like one of the pyramids its people built. 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 of Osiris and the goddess of magic, healing and protection.

Egyptians believed that the gods controlled the world. So it was important to keep them happy. They could make the Nile River overflow, cause hunger or even bring death.

The Egyptians also thought of some people as gods. Their leaders, called pharaohs, were believed to be gods in human form and were thought to hold the secrets of heaven and earth. The pharaohs were believed to be the god of the sky and war, Horus, during their lives. Horus was the son of Isis and Osiris. Then the pharaohs would become the god Osiris when they died, people believed.

The pharaohs had complete power over the people. After pharaohs died, huge stone pyramids were built as their graves. Pharaohs were buried in rooms inside the pyramids.

The people of Egypt trusted their pharaohs with many duties. Protection was at the top of the list. The pharaohs directed the army in case other countries attacked or people fought inside Egypt. Pharaohs often led battles in places like Nubia and Libya to add to Egypt's riches. Pharaohs also made whatever laws they wanted.

Farmers had to give the pharaoh some of the grain they grew. The grain was used to feed the people if food ran out. People pay part of what they own or earn to the government or to leaders. They are called taxes.

The chain of command

No single person could run Egypt without help. The pharaoh named a chief leader called a vizier. The vizier made sure that taxes were collected.

Working with the vizier were scribes who kept government records. The scribes had learned a rare skill in ancient Egypt. They could read and write.

Noble aims

Right below the pharaoh were nobles and priests. Nobles were the only ones who could hold government jobs. Nobles grew rich from gifts to the gods. All Egyptians, from pharaohs to farmers, gave gifts to the gods.

Priests were like preachers. They were responsible for pleasing the gods.

Soldier on

Soldiers were below the nobles. They fought wars and kept Egypt safe. In times of peace, soldiers were in charge of the farmers and slaves who built pyramids and palaces.

Skilled workers such as doctors and craftspeople made up the middle class. Craftspeople made pottery, tools and other useful things.

Storekeepers sold these goods to the people.

The bottom of the heap

At the bottom of the list were slaves and farmers. Those captured in war were forced to become slaves. They had to build things and do any other work the pharaoh or nobles wanted.

Farmers grew plants, raised animals, worked with stone and built the royal graves. They also kept large stores of water to use. Farmers paid taxes that could be more than half of their harvest. That is a lot of hay!

It was possible to move up in Egypt. Families saved money to send their sons to school. Boys who learned to read and write could become scribes. Then they could work in the government.

Rights of women

Where did women fit into this? 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. They could own and sell homes and land, 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 allowed 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 selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-6].

The people of Egypt trusted their pharaohs with many duties. Protection was at the top of the list. The pharaohs directed the army in case other countries attacked or people fought inside Egypt.

Which word could replace "protection" WITHOUT changing its meaning in the second sentence?

- (A) security
 - (B) shelter
 - (C) money
 - (D) magic
- 2 Read the selection from the section "The rights of women."

Women rulers did not claim to be Horus, though. Cleopatra said she was the reincarnation of the Egyptian goddess Isis.

What does the author mean by "reincarnation"?

- (A) having very little power within Egypt
 - (B) being from a country outside of Egypt
 - (C) having the presence of a god or goddess in a human body
 - (D) being a human more powerful than any god or goddess
- 3 Which of the following answer choices BEST describes the structure of the article?
- (A) problem and solution
 - (B) cause and effect
 - (C) order of events
 - (D) parts of a whole
- 4 Which paragraph from the section "The bottom of the heap" gives information about how people could improve their place in Egyptian society?