What was life like for a young slave in this ancient civilization?

Words to Know
- c.: abbreviation for circa, a Latin word meaning "around"; usually used with dates that are approximate.
- pharaoh: king.
- scribes: persons who earn a living with their reading and writing skills.
- vilify: accuse or speak ill of.

Picture a hot, dusty marketplace in ancient Egypt. A young girl goes barefoot and wears only a scratchy linen dress. She is frightened and confused as she listens to the shouting all around her. Why has she been brought to this strange, unfamiliar place? The girl is about to be sold to a new owner. She is a slave.

A merchant in the city of Thebes wants to sell the girl to a powerful government official. Ancient Egyptians do not have coins or paper money. So the two sides agree to exchange the girl for such items as clay jars and cloth. All together, these goods equal the value of a pound of silver—an expensive purchase.

The girl's new owner gives her an Egyptian name: Gemni-her-imenetet (Gemni for short). How will things turn out for Gemni? It's hard to say, exactly. Archaeologists found only her name and a few details about her on an ancient scroll of legal records. But such discoveries enable us to gain an understanding of daily life for slaves like Gemni. Their hard work and sweat helped build a civilization that lasted for 3,000 years.

"Property Of"

Gemni probably lived during the time of Pharaoh Ramses II, or Ramses the Great (1200s B.C.). Egyptians viewed Ramses II and other pharaohs as almost godlike figures.

But nobles and government officials actually ran the country. Lower down the social scale were educated people, including doctors and scribes. Below them were craftsmen and merchants. Most Egyptians were poor farmers or workers. Slaves were the lowest class of all.

In ancient Egypt, some people became slaves as punishment for a crime or for going into debt. But
most slaves were captured as prisoners of war. As one pharaoh boasted, “I carried away those whom my sword spared, as numerous captives, [tied up] like birds before my horses, [with] their wives and their children by the ten-thousand.”

Gemini was from Syria, in the Middle East, so she may have been one of those prisoners. But she may also have been kidnapped by bandits. Or, like Joseph in the Bible, she could have been sold into slavery by her own family.

**Slave to the Wealthy**

Thoughts of ancient Egypt usually bring to mind huge stone structures, especially the pyramids. But stone buildings were only for tombs or religious temples. Even the pharaohs lived in houses made of sun-dried mud bricks. A poor farmer probably had only a one- or two-room shack. The family that bought Gemini no doubt lived in a much grander house.

A powerful official’s home, scholars believe, had many rooms. Each one would have several windows—the only kind of air-conditioning available in the hot climate.

The house would have been surrounded by gardens and shaded by date palms, sycamores, and fig trees. Dogs, cats, monkeys, or other pets probably ran around the yard.

A slave like Gemini would have helped the woman of the house with daily chores. These chores might have included taking care of children, grinding wheat to make bread, cooking, cleaning, and hauling water for food and washing. Gemini might also have helped her mistress get dressed and apply makeup, which was worn by Egyptians of all classes and ages, male and female.

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Escaping From Slavery

Slaves did many types of work in Egypt, including serving in the army and toiling on farms. The most feared work was mining gold in Nubia (an area today in southern Egypt and northern Sudan). People died quickly in the brutal desert heat. When swearing an oath, Egyptians often said, “If I lie, may my nose and ears be cut off and I be sent to [Nubia].”

Egyptians believed in life after death. A collection of sayings and spells called The Book of the Dead was their guide through the afterlife. One saying went, “I have not domineered over slaves. I have not vilified a slave to his master.” Yet many slaves suffered beatings and other harsh treatment from cruel owners. A slave who ran away faced the death penalty.

However, there were ways to escape slavery. Free Egyptians often adopted young slaves like Gemini as their own children. Slaves could also marry into a free family or buy their own freedom. In the Bible, Joseph went on to become the pharaoh’s chief adviser. There are no Egyptian records of any ex-slave actually rising so high, but many slaves did become scribes and engineers.

If Gemini had been able to rise out of slavery, she would have enjoyed many rights. In ancient Egypt, free women had many of the same rights as men. For instance, they could own property; have a trade, such as weaving; and keep whatever they earned.

Today, we look upon ancient Egypt as one of the world’s most remarkable civilizations. Do you suppose Gemini and other slaves of the time saw it that way? Why or why not?

—Sean Price

Think About It

1. Describe life for a slave of Gemini’s time.
2. Do you think that the institution of slavery is ever justified? Why or why not?

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