SERFS AND SLAVES

Restricted Freedom. Many words were used in ancient Egyptian for groups of people whose freedom was restricted. None of these words corresponds directly to either the Greek and Roman or the American legal concepts of slavery. More accurate translations of Egyptian would include "dependent" (merjet); "personnel" (djet); "forced laborer" (heset); "worker" (bak); "servant" (hem); "royal servant" (hem-neb); "prisoner of war" (sekau-anh); and "Asiatic" (a-amu). In the Old Kingdom (circa 2675–2130 B.C.E.) and Middle Kingdom (circa 1980–1630 B.C.E.), all people who lived within these classifications were restricted somewhat in their movements. Yet, there is no general term meaning "slave." Furthermore, there was no real consciousness during the Old Kingdom or Middle Kingdom of a class of people classified as slaves. The Satire on the Trades, the catalogue of occupations composed in the Middle Kingdom, does not mention slaves. Yet, by the New Kingdom (circa 1539–1075 B.C.E.) the term servant approached something like the legal status of slave. In the Late Period (circa 664–332 B.C.E.), the word worker was the word used to indicate a person who was a type of chattel.

Property. The difference between a slave and others was that a slave could be bought and sold. A slave was property but not exactly the same as other property. In the New Kingdom, slaves were generally foreigners captured in war. However, even foreigners were permitted to practice a variety of professions and could own property. Slaves could function as herdsmen, barbers, builders, sandal makers, and even administrators of cloth.

Legal Parameters. A slave was the opposite of a nemhu, a person who paid dues directly to the state. A nemhu also lived independently of state support, outside of the system of government rations. A slave, on the other hand, had the right of support from the master. By the Late Period, many individuals were willing to sell themselves into slavery in order to obtain regular support. Slaves could be sold to another master, but that master had to guarantee support. In return, the slave’s labor benefited the master. Even so, slaves

Early Dynasty 5 statue (circa 2500–2350 B.C.E.) of a seated scribe from his tomb at Saqqara (Musée du Louvre, Paris)
Scene from the Dynasty 18 tomb of the priest Khamuas at Western Thebes (circa 1539-1295/1292 B.C.E.). He and his wife oversee the activities of servants (British Museum, London).

Servant girls and a guest at a banquet, from the tomb of Nebamun, Western Thebes; painting on plaster, circa 1360 B.C.E. (British Museum, London)
retained rights over property. A slave could also testify in court, marry a free person, and be responsible for restitution. In this sense a slave was a legal person and could establish contracts with third parties. Perhaps most important of such contracts were marriages. Some slave contracts were limited in time. Both parties would have to agree to extend the contract. Children of slaves, however, belonged to the master unless separately freed.

Assessment. In sum, a slave occupied a legally recognized status where the individual was subject to control over his services but still retained legal rights. A slave could have a profession and was entitled to compensation. A slave could be a native Egyptian or a foreigner and could marry a free person. Slaves were usually bound for life but could be freed and acquire complete control over the legal disposition of their property. While slaves the children were part of the master's household and received support.

Sources:

**SINAI DESERT EXPEDITIONS**

**Raw Materials.** The Egyptians exploited the Sinai Desert for raw materials, mining lead, tin, galena, some gold, and most important, turquoise. The first known turquoise jewelry was discovered in the tomb of Djer, second king of Dynasty 1 (circa 3000–2800 B.C.E.). Thus, Djer's reign probably marks the beginning of Egyptian Sinai expeditions.

**Permanent Settlements.** The bedouin native to this region impeded Egyptian exploitation of Sinai. Beginning with King Den (fourth king of Dynasty 1), royal inscriptions mentioned pacification of the Sinai Bedouin. In Dynasty 3 (circa 2675–2625 B.C.E.), inscriptions continued at the mines in Sinai but it was only in Dynasty 4 (circa 2625–2500 B.C.E.) that the Egyptians established a permanent settlement there. King Sneferu received much of the credit for inaugurating a long period of peace in the region and establishing permanent installations at the copper, turquoise, and malachite mines of Wadi Nasb and Wadi Maghara. Later, in the Middle Kingdom (circa 1800–1630 B.C.E.), a Cult of Sneferu was established there, attesting to his importance for the Egyptians who worked and lived in Sinai. Four kings of Dynasty 5 (circa 2500–2350 B.C.E.—Sahure, Nyusserre, Menkauhor, and Djedkare Isesi—left inscriptions at the Sinai mines. These inscriptions demonstrate that the Egyptians of this period made regular expeditions to the area.

**Maintaining Control.** The lack of Egyptian inscriptions in the Sinai during the First Intermediate Period (circa 2130–1980 B.C.E.) shows that the Egyptians only exploited the Sinai when there was a strong central government. Neb-hepetre Mentuhotep II reasserted Egyptian claims to Sinai when he established the Middle Kingdom. He had to subdue the Bedouin in order to make the trade routes in Sinai safe for the Egyptians to use. Amenemhet or Ammenemes I also reported expeditions to subdue the Bedouin, a sign that...