History

Society

The Egyptians were practical, tradition-loving, conservative, orderly, and tolerant. They organized the world into categories, with clear outlines and boundaries. They were suspicious of the unknown and avoided taking unnecessary risks. Their government was highly centralized and heavily bureaucratic. They were dedicated record keepers. They loved peace and order, and preferred peace to war. They wanted to live and let live.

Although much of what we know about the ancient Egyptians comes from tombs, temples, and mummies, death did not dominate Egyptian life. They loved the good life—festivals, music, color, ornament, beer, wine, and sweets—and simply wanted to make sure they could also have these things in the afterlife.

The Nile Valley is a long corridor linking Africa with the Near East. The Egyptians reflected ethnic influences from both regions. Some had dark skin and features typical of the peoples of central Africa. Others were lighter or olive-skinned, with Mediterranean or Near Eastern features.

They had no notion of "race" based on skin color or appearance. Since the earliest days when the region was settled, easy travel up and down the Nile ensured that people from different regions and with different ethnic backgrounds mixed and intermarried. Travelers and invaders also intermarried and intermingled with the local people.

The Egyptians did make one major distinction: There were the people of Kemet, who spoke the Egyptian language and followed Egyptian religion and customs ("us"); and the people who did not ("them"). Those people were considered misguided and inferior.

Divine Balance
Egyptians believed that the goddess Ma'at played an important role in maintaining the balance of order and justice. Her symbol was an ostrich feather, here stuck into her headband.

The guiding principle of Egyptian society was *ma'at*, which means balance, rightness, order, justice, truth, harmony, good behavior, and keeping things the way they have always been. The stability and predictability of the Nile River contributed to this world view.

In nature, *ma'at* was the rising and setting of the sun, the orderly changing of the seasons, and the annual inundation. In daily life and business, *ma'at* was fairness and justice. In government affairs, *ma'at* meant following traditions and doing things the way they had been done before. In religious matters, *ma'at* meant living a good life, honoring the gods and goddesses, and being tolerant. Everyone, even the king, was expected to live by *ma'at*.

Ma'at was also the name of the goddess of balance and order. She, and the idea of *ma'at*, were sometimes associated with the cat (*mit* or *miit*), because of the balance between fierceness and gentleness the Egyptians saw in cats.
Cats were revered by the Egyptians because they were so useful. By killing rodents and other pests, cats protected the food supply, kept the home cleaner, and enhanced family health. They also represented their own ma'at—a balance between fierceness and gentleness.

The opposite of *ma'at* was *isfet*—chaos, mischief, disruption, and disorder—represented by the god Seth. He was associated with the red lands of the desert.

Egyptian society was like a pyramid. At the top, set apart like the golden capstone on the Great Pyramid, was the king. At the broad base of the social pyramid were peasants, who made up 80 percent of the population. In between were priests, government officials, artisans, tradesmen, and soldiers.

Egyptian society consisted of a wealthy, privileged upper class, masses of very poor peasants, and (after the Middle Kingdom) a small middle class of artisans and professionals. The wealthiest families enjoyed diets, clothing, possessions, lifestyles, pleasures, and conveniences that the poorest people could not even imagine. Yet even the poorest Egyptians had advantages not dreamed of by peasants in other parts of the ancient world. Compared to other ancient lands, Egypt was lucky, healthy, and prosperous.

### The King and His Palace

At the top of the pyramid were Egypt's kings, who were also viewed as gods. They were responsible for the country's spiritual and material well-being. As the living example of the god Horus, the king battled cosmic forces. He upheld *ma'at* against *isfet*. Everything he said was law. Justice in Egypt meant "what the king loves." Wrongdoing was "what the king hates."

As chief priest and fertility symbol, the king was responsible for the prosperity of the land, the success of crops, the annual, moderate inundation of the Nile, and the daily rising and setting of the sun. He was chief rainmaker and water-finder. His coronation took place at the beginning of *akhet*, the inundation season, to symbolize his power over the river. As military leader, he had to keep Upper and Lower Egypt united and content, and protect Egypt from enemies and invaders.
This statue shows several of the marks of a king, including a false beard, a flail, and a shepherd's crook.

The king owned everything—legally speaking, at least. All land, resources, animals, crops, people, every ounce of gold, every jar of beer, and every mud-brick in every peasant's hut were technically the king's. He held absolute power over life and death.

Everything the king touched—his clothing, crowns, jewelry, tools, food, sandals, beer mug—was blessed with magic rituals and reserved for his use alone. Much of his time was spent performing magical and religious rituals to keep the universe running properly. His performance of these rituals magically activated similar rituals performed by lesser priests.

The palace, called per-aa (which means "great house"), was a group of residences for the king and his family, harem, friends, personal staff, and government officials. It was also the seat of the central government and the military headquarters. It included a major temple with its own priesthood. Many kings kept two per-aa (in Upper and Lower Egypt) and also many smaller palaces.

The per-aa was a place of luxury, beauty, and ceremony. No effort or expense was spared to impress visitors. Everything the king did followed strict guidelines. He was constantly surrounded by officials, priests, people of the royal court, visitors, and favor-seekers.

Many favorites and officers of the court and their families and staffs lived at per-aa at the king's expense. These Honored Ones, as they were known, were granted special favors: tombs near the king's and fabulous grave goods (linen, oils, wood for coffins, stone for sarcophagi). In the Old Kingdom, these honors meant they would join the king in eternal life—an extremely rare privilege.

The posts that had the highest rank were King's Friend and Unique Friend. Other top posts were Lordship of the Secret of the Royal House (keeper of the crown jewels) and Lordship of the Secret of all the Royal Sayings (issuer of invitations into the king's presence). The Director of the King's Dress supervised a large staff, including the Valet of the Hands, Director of Oils and Unguents (lotions), Keeper of the King's Wigs, and Groom of the Bedchamber. Each supervised large staffs.

The king chose his heir from among his sons—usually the son of his chief wife. If he had no sons, the king might choose a senior
official who had married a princess. Many princes were prepared to become king, just in case. (Although some went into military or religious service, particularly if an heir was named early on.) They studied astronomy, mathematics, civil engineering, architecture, and magical-religious rituals and spells.

Princes participated in hunting expeditions, military tournaments, and sporting competitions. They were expected to show exceptional talent and ability. Some princes ruled as coregents (co-kings) with their fathers, although Egyptologists do not agree on how many kings really had coregents. Many princes spent time in the army and took part in military campaigns.

While still a child, the crown prince (the one selected to be heir to the throne) was generally married to a sister, half-sister, or cousin. This kept the royal bloodlines "pure" and honored the god Osiris and his sister-wife, the goddess Isis.

**Royal Ladies and Harem Women**

The king's mother (known as the "great royal mother") and the king's chief wife (known as the "great royal wife") were associated with the goddess Hathor. They were considered to be almost goddesses. A few women ruled as kings, and others ruled as coregents because the king was too young to rule. Royal ladies had expensive funerals, tombs, and grave goods, though not as elaborate as those of kings. Princesses received some education, and sometimes they learned to read and write.

In a scene from her tomb, Princess Nefertiabet (daughter of Khufu) wears a panther-skin dress and sits on a stool with bull's feet. She stretches one hand toward a table where there are slices of white bread with a golden crust. These elements show the dead person's nourishment in the afterlife.

Wealthy and royal ladies managed several large estates and supervised a lot of servants. Especially during the imperial age, they enjoyed the best the world could offer. They scented themselves with expensive imported perfumes, sipped the finest wines, and dined on fancy foods. They owned huge collections of wigs and jewels. Their clothing chests overflowed with fine things, from royal linen dresses so light you could see through them to pleated and embroidered gowns made especially for them.

Particularly during Egypt's imperial age, kings kept harems of hundreds of wives. Many were brought from foreign lands (along with their many servants and attendants) to firm up diplomatic ties with peoples in distant parts of the empire. Talented female singers, dancers, and musicians were often added to the royal harem to entertain at court.

A harem woman might not see the king very often, even though she was married to him. Still, there was always a chance he might choose her as a favorite. And there was a small chance that the king's great wife would not give birth to a son. If that happened, and the son of a harem woman would be promoted to crown prince. Whatever her origin, a woman whose son became king
became a queen herself—the great royal mother.

**Nobles and Priests**

A few hundred privileged families controlled most of Egypt's wealth. Wealth meant land. The king (who owned everything) granted large estates to his relatives, friends, and favorites. These large estate-holders paid no taxes, but they collected heavy taxes from the peasants on their estates. They became fabulously wealthy "little kings." Nobles had a moral duty under ma'at to care for the poor, but they were not legally required to do so.

Priests performed daily religious-magical rituals for the dead, and for gods and goddesses. These very involved rituals were based on ancient traditions and had to be carried out exactly the same way every time. If the king—Egypt's chief priest—did not perform the proper daily rituals, the rituals performed by ordinary priests were worthless.

The dead and the gods required daily nourishment. Rituals included offerings of food and drink, sacrifices of animals, and magical spells. One important ritual in every temple was the daily washing, feeding, and clothing of the statue of the god or goddess.

Individual priests had specialties such as teaching, record-keeping, caring for the dead, conducting funerals, sacrificing animals, or caring for the god's statue. They paid no taxes and were supported by the government. All but the smallest temples included places to store grain, libraries, healing centers, and schools. Temples also employed staffs of artisans, craftsmen, scribes, butchers, bakers, herdsmen, cooks, guards, doorkeepers, and janitors.

In large temples that were dedicated to the major gods, priests controlled enormous wealth. At the height of their prosperity under Twentieth Dynasty king Ramesses II, the priests of Amun-Re at Thebes controlled 90,000 peasants, thousands of acres of farmland, 500,000 head of cattle, 400 orchards (where fruit trees grow), 80 ships, and 50 workshops. The Amun-Re temples received all the taxes from 65 towns and cities in Egypt and its empire.

Most priests worked part-time at small temples of local gods or goddesses. As Egypt's most educated class, priests were doctors, mummy preparers, astronomers, mathematicians, architects, librarians, teachers, and scribes. They also ran the temple schools.

While on duty, a priest had to be "pure." This meant shaving his head and body and cleaning his mouth with natron (a drying mineral), among other ritual practices. There were many things he was not allowed to do and many things he was required to do. While performing rituals, priests wore leopard skins, masks, wands of office, and elaborate jewelry.

Women were not allowed to become priests. However, they could be professional mourners (people who express sadness) at funerals, acting out the grief of the goddess Isis and Nephthys at the death of Osiris. They could be sacred prostitutes in the temples of the fertility god Min. They could be temple musicians, shaking the sistrum (a sacred musical rattle) or playing instruments during ceremonies. The word "priestess" generally meant a temple prostitute or musician. Women also helped take care of their family cults by bringing offerings to the dead or burning incense at tombs.

**Government Officials**

The vizier, or tjaty, was the king's top government official. He was the king's eyes and ears, his right-hand man, his enforcer, and his chief advisor. The vizier enjoyed enormous personal wealth, prestige, and power, but he also carried heavy burdens of responsibility.

He consulted with the king every day about major issues and decisions. He planned the king's schedule, hired and fired royal household staff, and supervised the king's bodyguards. As manager of all the official records, he inspected and approved government documents, issued receipts from royal storehouses and granaries, and sent out palace messengers and diplomats. As acting chief justice of the courts, he judged arguments over land. He oversaw the cattle census.

Every few months, the vizier toured the country. He inspected canals, reservoirs, and dams. He supervised cutting down trees and building ships. He made sure the border forts were well-supplied and secure. He organized defenses against border raids. No
The vizier supervised a personal staff of scribes, assistants, couriers (people who carry messages), guards, and stewards (people who manage a household or property). Many kings had two viziers—one for Upper Egypt and one for Lower Egypt. In the early dynasties, the vizier was usually a relative of the king. The job could be passed from father to son, but only in cases of ability and merit. Kings were advised to appoint only very rich men as viziers, because they were less likely to be tempted by bribes.

Some viziers were also architects, doctors, and astronomers. One of the most famous, Imhotep, was vizier to Third Dynasty king Djoser. He was the first to make large buildings entirely of stone. Imhotep was also famous as a doctor, mathematician, astronomer, magician, statesman, and wise man. He was credited with inventing the calendar. In later years, he was worshipped as a god and was considered to be a son of Ptah, the god of arts and learning.

Like modern bureaucrats, viziers loved to add employees to their departments. Reporting to the vizier were several sub-viziers, cabinet officers, and department heads. The chief steward, master of the horse, scribe of the recruits, and superintendent of works also reported to the vizier. So did the nomarchs—governors of Egypt's 42 districts (called nomes).

The chancellor (known as the director of the seal) oversaw taxes, trade, and economic affairs. Overseers of the treasury looked after raw materials, tribute, loot, and raw materials such as metals. Overseers of the granary managed the harvesting and storage of crops.

Egypt's government had many layers. It was bureaucratic, and very expensive to run. It collected heavy taxes and spent a lot. Huge departments—in charge of farming, granaries, taxes, borders, trade, health, the army, shipbuilding, foreign diplomacy, law—had branch headquarters in Upper and Lower Egypt. Each had many sub-departments and regional offices.

Regional officials working throughout Egypt and in conquered provinces reported to the vizier. One of the most powerful regional officials was the viceroy of Nubia. He ran conquered Nubia, oversaw military forces and border forts, and kept the southern trade routes open. He commanded a large bureaucracy and ruled independently, far from the king's eye. This job was usually passed from father to son.

Egypt was divided into 42 nomes: 22 in Upper Egypt, 20 in Lower Egypt. Throughout Egypt's history, the nomes were the basic administrative units of government. Nome boundaries were ancient, and nomarchs were the descendants of Predynastic tribal chieftains. The nomarch was governor, chief judge, and high priest of the local god or goddess. Each town or city had a Council of Elders that reported to the nomarch.

The Middle Class
A traveling scribe carried his tools with him, including inks, brushes, and quills that could be carried in a box like this one.

A middle class emerged during the Middle Kingdom. It included independent artisans, tradesmen, scribes, and professional soldiers. Most lived in towns or cities, and they gathered in districts with other members of their profession. They formed informal guilds (unions) and tradesmen's groups. They did not control estates, but they were often wealthy and had many possessions. They depended on wealthy customers and clients, but were not tied to a wealthy landowner's estate the way most peasants were.

Only 2 to 5 percent of Egyptians could read and write. They were scribes, who were essential to Egypt's agricultural economy and bureaucratic government. When a government official visited a district to inspect granaries, enforce tax collections, hold a criminal trial, open a new temple, supervise repair of a dam or canal, or oversee a building project, a team of scribes was there, writing everything down.

Like modern technology workers, scribes traveled frequently for their jobs. Their equipment had to be as compact, lightweight, portable, and useful as a modern business traveler's laptop. A scribe carried his tools in a custom-made box decorated with colorful designs. He had a small palette (like a child's watercolor box) with shallow pots of dry red and black ink. (He often carried blue, green, and yellow ink, too.) He packed small pots for gum (a binder for ink) and water, a mortar and pestle (a bowl with a heavy grinding stick) for grinding ink, lumps of raw minerals for colors, extra pens and papyrus scrolls, brushes made of rope or crushed twigs, tools for repairing his pens and brushes, and a clipboard-like writing surface. He was ready for any job.

The scribe moistened his reed pen in gum and drew it across one of the colors on his palette. In flowing hieratic script, he wrote on scrolls of papyrus paper propped up on his writing surface. Many statues show the typical scribe sitting cross-legged, looking up alertly, pen raised, ready to write.

Scribes were always in demand and always busy. A talented, ambitious scribe had his choice of interesting jobs. He could work in the royal household, on the vizier's staff, with a professional guild, or at the estate of a nobleman. He might work at a building site tracking labor, materials, and progress. He could work in a temple, copying religious texts or teaching student scribes. He could provide sketches of hieroglyphic texts to stone carvers and painters working on decorating a tomb or temple.

Egypt's professionals—engineers, architects, astronomers, mathematicians, and doctors—came from the ranks of scribes. Scribes could become civil engineers, in charge of harbors, irrigation systems, roads, canals, and public works. They might go along with trading or mining expeditions to Nubia, Lebanon, or Sinai to negotiate trades or record business deals. They might join diplomatic missions to write down treaties and trade agreements.

Scribes were almost always men. The job was often passed down from father to son, but a clever peasant boy might be selected to attend a temple school. A Middle Kingdom literary work called Satire of the Trades impressed upon students the advantages of being a scribe, and the miseries of every other occupation.

Scribes generally did not pay taxes. They were supported generously by the government and by temples. They were fed, housed, and given fine clothes. They did no heavy labor. A scribe was sometimes his own boss (although most were part of a government administration). A scribe often supervised important projects. He was honored and respected by all, and held up as a role model for the young.

The scribe's high status also brought responsibilities. He was expected to be a man of especially good character and to live up to the reputation of his profession. Scribes were held in such high regard that wealthy men who were not scribes often had statues made showing themselves as scribes.

Egyptian artisans, another part of the middle class, created beautiful work, but not for personal artistic expression. Their statues, paintings, and carvings had specific religious, magical, or ritual purposes. In the early days, art mainly served the dead (especially kings), and the gods. As Egypt grew richer, artisans began creating beautiful and useful objects for the living.

Most artisans labored in workshops as members of efficient production teams. They did not sign their work and get individual recognition. Their work was dedicated to the glory of the king, the dead, and the gods and goddesses.

They had plenty of opportunity to demonstrate technical excellence and pride in their workmanship. Their work required talent,
skill, patience, and discipline. Though it had to follow strict conventions and traditions, it was frequently witty and inventive, and almost always graceful and elegant.

Artisans apprenticed (learned their trade) for years in the workshops of master craftsmen. Most artisans did not know how to read or write. They copied plans and sketches provided by scribes or priests.

One workers' colony studied by Egyptologists, at Deir el-Medina near Thebes, was occupied by generations of artisans and tradesmen who worked on tombs in the Valley of the Kings. They lived with their families in a walled village, enjoying a large measure of independence and self-government. They worked four hours in the morning, took a lunch-and-nap break, then worked another four hours. They enjoyed one day of rest every 10 days (10 days was an Egyptian week). They often took time off for festivals and religious holidays. In their off hours, they were free to cut and decorate tombs for themselves and their families in the nearby cliffs. Some worked part-time as priests.

Workers were paid in wheat and barley. The government supplied fish, vegetables, oils, butter, salt, charcoal, wine, and beer. They had servants to do laundry, carry water, grind grain, and catch fish. They employed cooks, butchers, rope-makers, weavers, and basket makers.

The Military

Another way to raise one's status was in the military. Before the Middle Kingdom, Egypt did not have a regular army. Soldiers were drafted when they were needed. Each nome had to send a specific number of men. Military leaders were citizen soldiers, not professionals.

During Egypt's imperial age, however, military service became a profitable career. Professional officers were rewarded with tax-free estates, livestock, gold, ceremonial weapons, and comfortable retirement jobs.

During the New Kingdom, Egypt had two large armies divided into four divisions. They were stationed permanently in Upper and Lower Egypt. The army included infantry (soldiers who fight on foot), scouts (who go ahead of the army to check out the situation), charioteers (who fought from chariots), marines (who fought from land or on boats), and archers (who used bows and arrows). Officers successfully used strategies, tactics, and innovations introduced by the Hyksos, including horses and chariots.

New Kingdom soldiers were a privileged, prosperous class. During peacetime, they lived in military communities. Soldiers returning from battles were rewarded with land, livestock, and peasants to farm their land, which they could keep as long as at least one member of their family remained on active duty.

A military career was one of the few paths to status and wealth for a poor young man. Even common soldiers shared in battle loot, including cattle, weapons, and other items taken from defeated peoples. Ahmes Penekhbet, a soldier who distinguished himself in battle against the Hyksos and Asiatians, won armbands, bracelets, rings, two golden axes, and two silver axes. He also received the "gold of valor"—six gold flies and three gold lions—from the king.

Most Egyptians were unwilling to go abroad for military expeditions. They were terrified that if they died outside Egypt, their bodies would not be properly mummified or buried, and the proper prayers and spells would not be said at their funerals (if they even had funerals). If that happened, they would lose their chance at eternal life. So even at the height of empire, much of the army was made up of mercenaries (soldiers for hire) and troops from conquered lands, especially Nubians.

Late Period armies were mostly Asiatics and Greeks. Slaves and foreign captives often won their freedom by joining the army.

Serfs, Slaves, and Guards

Egyptian peasants were serfs—people who had to work their masters' land and could not leave. They could also tend their own land and own animals when they had time. But most peasants owned very little, and everything they produced was heavily taxed. Most lived in small mud-brick houses in villages next to the fields. Each village had a Council of Elders, members of the main families who handled day-to-day matters and minor disputes.
A peasant's life was one of constant, backbreaking labor. He planted, tended, and harvested his master's main crop. He labored in his master's garden and tended his master's herds, flocks, and beehives. He carried endless heavy clay jars of water from river or canal to field and garden, balanced in pairs across his shoulders on a frame called a yoke.

The government also required labor for certain projects from peasants, although it was not considered slavery. During the inundation, the fields were under water and most peasants had nothing to do. The government took advantage of this idle labor force. They were drafted to build royal tombs and temples, cut and haul stone, work mines, or for military campaigns. Canals, dams, and reservoirs that held and managed the waters of the inundation were in constant need of improvement, maintenance, and repair. Draftees were put to work year round on these projects and were sent wherever their labor was most needed.

The work was often very hard and dangerous. But the men were fed, housed, and treated reasonably well. Evading the labor draft was a serious offense, and it was punished harshly. If a draftee ran away, his family might be sent to prison or held hostage until he returned.

A man who had enough money, could hire a replacement worker to take his place in the labor draft. This a practice was not officially approved, but the government tolerated it.

This kind of labor was not popular. Still, many men probably saw their experience as an adventure. This might be their only chance to see the world beyond their village and participate in the great works of the age. A talented worker might be noticed by an important official and given education and training.

Most slaves were foreign war captives from Asia or Nubia. The concept of a slave as a person totally owned by another person did not exist. The line between "slave" and "citizen" was fuzzy. The personal slave of a wealthy man was often better off than a peasant. The slave could own property, and even have servants. He could purchase his freedom, or his master could free him with a word. Most Egyptian slaves were treated reasonably well, especially compared to slaves elsewhere in the world at the time. They were fed, housed, and given a yearly allowance of clothing, oils, and linen. When it was especially hot, their work hours were reduced. In the Late Period, many foreigners, including former slaves and descendants of slaves, rose to positions of power.
Slaves performed many tasks in Egyptian life. This statue shows a slave making beer, a very popular Egyptian drink.

The Medjay (or Medjai) were desert wanderers from Nubia who were hired by Egypt as policemen, guards, and soldiers. The Medjay had reputations as fearless guards and brutal law enforcers. They punished criminals such as tax evaders and people who tried to avoid the labor draft. They guarded palaces, temples, and tombs all over Egypt. But no police force, even the fierce Medjay, was ever able to stop the robbers who looted just about every royal tomb in the land.