History

Everyday Life

As Egypt grew, some of the settlements along the Nile River blossomed into towns and cities. These towns had districts for temples, tradesmen, artisans, and laborers. But most people lived in rural areas and villages. At most, 5 percent of the people were city dwellers.

Cities and towns were hot, dry, and dusty. They were crowded with people and animals. Streets were cramped and narrow. Flies and biting insects swarmed and buzzed. Smoke from cooking fires lit using dried animal dung (feces) hung heavily in the air.

Although the Egyptians were clean in their homes and persons, they saw any space outside their front doors as a place to dump things. Trash and garbage were taken to the nearest canal, thrown into alleys or temporary pits, or piled in heaps wherever there was space. Heated by the broiling sun, trash heaps quickly became smelly nightmares, filled with bugs and rodents.

Once the Egyptians domesticated the cat (during the Middle Kingdom), conditions in the cities improved. Cats quickly went to work killing rats and mice and other pests in alleys, dumps, homes, and granaries. This improved health and preserved precious food supplies.

Homes and Other Buildings

Most homes and villages were built on high ground to protect them from the inundation. Settlements in low-lying areas were surrounded by dams and berms (walls of earth). These berms had to be constantly inspected and maintained to make sure the water would not flow in.

Good-quality wood for building had to be imported. Building with stone was expensive and was hard work. Limestone, granite, huge wooden columns, and other expensive materials lasted a long time, but they were very expensive. These materials were used for homes for the dead and homes for the gods.

Houses and other buildings for the living, from a peasant's hut to a king's palace, were built of mud-brick: clay-mud from the Nile, mixed with chopped straw or sand and dried in the sun. By 3000 BCE, Egyptian builders were already expert mud-brick builders. They had even developed standard brick sizes and shapes.

Sun-dried mud-brick was cheap, easily available, had many uses, and could be shaped quickly into structures of any size. In the hot, dry climate, mud-brick buildings lasted several generations.

The Egyptians knew how to bake bricks in a large oven called a kiln, to dry them out and make them hard. But sun drying was easy and efficient. And sun-dried bricks were strong and long-lasting. So they saw no need to build oven and use up fire fuel baking their bricks.

Home for a peasant farmer or workman was just a few small rooms. At sites of major public projects, like the Giza Plateau during the Fourth Dynasty pyramid age, the government built "workers' villages." These were rows of simple houses.

The typical home, big or small, followed a model that is still common in Egypt and other hot climates. Facing the street, the home was just a blank wall with a door. A visitor passed through a reception area before reaching an open courtyard (an area surrounded by walls that has no roof).

Several rooms surrounded the courtyard. The most private ones were for the women. The arrangement, size, number, furnishings, and decorations of rooms varied greatly. It depended on the homeowner's wealth, status, and taste. Some homes had a second story or additional courtyards. Flat roofs were reached by staircases or ladders. These became breezy outdoor sleeping places on hot nights.
Thick walls of mud-brick helped keep the inside of the house comfortable. Tiny windows set high in the walls helped heat escape. The few small openings were covered with linen hangings or wood shutters to help keep out dust and insects. Pots of scented oils sweetened the air.

Some homes had small, triangular roof structures (called "wind towers") that directed cooling north winds into the home. These were common features of Egyptian homes well into the 20th century, and even today.

Inside the house it was quite dark. Houses were lighted at night with small oil lamps made of pottery. (Herodotus found the scent of the Egyptians' lamps, lit with castor oil, unpleasant.) Fancier homes were lit with elaborate lamps of carved stone that allowed light to shine through, such as alabaster.

Most cooking was done in outdoor kitchens on stone hearths (surfaces in front of a fire) or on metal braziers (a kind of barbecue). The most common cooking fuel, still used in rural Egypt today, was cow dung. Charcoal and wood scraps were also occasionally burned.

Egyptians loved plants and flowers. They grew a great variety for home and personal decoration, and as offerings to the gods and the dead. Many herbs and flowers were used in food, cosmetics, and medicines. Country villas of wealthy families had lush gardens that were irrigated year round with water carried in stone jars from a canal or the river.

The courtyard was a pleasant retreat from the dirt, insects, and noise of the street. It might have a pool of cool water surrounded by flowers and vines, date palm and fig trees, and other fruit and shade trees. Some families planted sycamore trees, which were sacred to the goddess Hathor.

Many families plastered their interior walls and had them painted with colorful designs, flowers, animals, and nature scenes. Many homeowners laid floors of pressed clay or brick paving tiles, coated with smooth plaster. Floor coverings woven of reeds, papyrus, or palm straw helped trap the ever-present dust and sand, and served as sleeping mats.

**Interior Decorating**

The Egyptians' preferred a clean, uncluttered interior decor. There was not much furniture, and the few pieces were simple: low tables, wood stools with woven straw seats, and stands or pedestals to hold platters of food. Chairs with arms were rare, and were reserved for important guests.

Most people slept on the floor on woven mats, although some used low, built-in platforms of brick or wood. According to Herodotus, people in Upper Egypt slept on raised platforms, above the clouds of flies and gnats. In Lower Egypt, sleepers draped their mats with fine netting—which they used by day to catch fish. This kept away the bugs.

During the prosperous New Kingdom, upper-class homes were more richly furnished. They had beds, chairs, and couches topped with soft cushions. Furniture legs were carved in wonderful shapes, such as animals' paws.

Mud-brick construction made it easy to build in handy wall niches for linens, pottery, and other household goods. Jewelry, clothing, cosmetics, perfumes, toys, and other personal possessions were stored in wooden chests, boxes, or woven baskets.

**The Egyptian Family and Household**
The Egyptians highly valued marriage and family. The basic family unit was the nuclear family of father, mother, and children. Households often included unmarried or widowed female relatives. The family supported these women, and in return gained extra hands for childcare and housework.

Couples wanted to have as many healthy children as possible. If a married couple was unable to have children, they often divorced. Childless couples sometimes adopted children.

Women had a great deal of freedom, independence, and status. Unlike women of most ancient societies, they could control or rent property, inherit wealth, own slaves, leave property to their children (or decide not to), take legal cases to court on their own, operate businesses, work outside the home, and live alone without a male guardian.

Their lives were not easy, though. Girls were typically married by age 12 to 14, as soon as they could have children. Many babies died in infancy, so it was important to make the most of the years when a woman could give birth.

Marriage was an agreement between a man and a woman to live together and have children. There was no official ceremony. There were divorces, separations, and remarriages. Adultery (having a relationship with someone other than your husband or wife) was punished harshly, especially in women. Polygamy (a man taking multiple wives) was accepted, but only wealthy men were able to have multiple wives. Polygamy was too expensive for the average working man.

A married woman was called "mistress of the house." She was responsible for child care, cooking, carrying water, grinding grain, baking bread, brewing beer, spinning thread and weaving cloth, making and repairing clothing, and tending the shrines of domestic gods and goddesses. Wealthy women supervised many servants.

Pregnancy and childbirth were extremely dangerous for both mother and baby. Doctors could offer little help. Pregnant women recited magical spells and prayers, made offerings to Bes, Taweret, and Bastet, and wore protective charms. A woman gave birth
in a squatting or kneeling position, balanced over a platform. A midwife (a person who is trained to help women give birth) stood by to help. Afterwards, the woman and her child had to leave home for several days for purification in a special "birth tent."

An Egyptian Child's World

This wooden toy cat from Thebes has a mouth that opens and closes.

A few Egyptians enjoyed long lives. Pepy II, last king of the Sixth Dynasty, ruled for more than 90 years. But most people did not live past age 35 or 40. Three or four out of every five children did not survive to adulthood. Because so many children died young, children were only gradually included in the life of the family and community.

Childhood was brief but happy, with games, toys, and freedom. Egyptians often named (or nicknamed) their children after animals, such as Monkey, Cat, Frog, Mouse, Hound, or Gazelle. The name was usually based on the child's behavior. Miit (cat) was a popular name for girls.

Children played games much like today's: leap frog, running and jumping, swimming, tug-of-war, ball games of many kinds, and a form of hopscotch. Gymnastics, vaulting, and handball were popular with both boys and girls. One ancient game, "goose steps," is still played in rural Egypt. In it, one player jumps over a barrier made by two seated players.

Girls played with dolls and small figures of animals. Children fished, swam, and rowed small boats. Some wealthy families had swimming pools.

Late childhood was devoted to preparing for adulthood. A peasant child's life of hard labor began early, helping with planting and harvesting. Boys were considered fully adult by age 15 or 16. They were expected to take on adult responsibilities, adopt a profession, and support their families.

Girls almost never learned to read and write. Priests, nobles, and the wealthy sent their sons to temple schools to study under the strict guidance of priest-scribes. A peasant boy who showed extraordinary intelligence might be sent to school. This was a major turning point in his family's fortunes, because the few people who could read ran the country.

Most of a young man's higher education was on-the-job training, alongside a master in his chosen field. Youngsters studying to become priests, and students of mathematics, medicine, or astronomy, stayed at the temple school for advanced education.

Bread and Beer for Peasants and Kings
The staples (basic foods) for everyone, peasant to king, were bread and beer. Emmer and spelt, the two kinds of wheat grown in Egypt, were ground on a grinding stone called a *saddle quern*. This work was done by women, and was very hard on the back and knees. Bakers created dozens of kinds of bread, to be served with thick spreads of fava beans, lentils, or chickpeas.

Even humble homes had a kitchen brewery. Barley flour was formed into loaves, which were lightly baked. The baked loaves were soaked in tubs of water and allowed to ferment (develop alcohol). Other varieties of beer were made from fermented wheat, wheat loaves, or plain ground, unbaked barley. Beer was sweetened with honey, dates, or fruit juices.

Wine made from fermented palm sap or grapes was also popular and widely available. Vineyards in the Nile Delta produced the best wines, but wine also came from several other regions. Imported wines had snob appeal, just as they do today. Wealthy families grew grapes in their gardens and pressed their own wines. The Egyptians preferred their wine sweet, just like their beer, so they added honey or fruit juices. Beer and wine stayed cool in large, sealed pottery jugs.

Even the poorest peasant could add onions and eggs to his diet. Also on the regular menu was fish, caught in the Nile or in the many irrigation canals. Nile perch, catfish, and tilapia were roasted over coals. Fish and pork were considered impure foods and priests and wealthy people did not eat them. But both were common in peasants' diets.

Farm families kept flocks of birds for the table. Goose, duck, crane, and pigeon, roasted over charcoal, were favorite menu choices. They were available to all but the poorest people. Wild birds of the marshes were trapped in nets or brought down with boomerang-like throw sticks. Some were killed and eaten. Others were kept in small flocks for eggs.

Birds such as geese were often served in Egyptian homes. This statue shows a cook roasting a goose. Farm families kept flocks of birds to eat, and also trapped wild birds in the marshes.

Wealthy families had a much richer and more varied diet. They regularly enjoyed milk, butter, and cheese from herds of cows and goats. They frequently ate beef, goat, lamb, and mutton (sheep). All these foods were rare in a peasant's diet. In the palaces, people also dined on unusual meats such as gazelle and antelope.

**A Wealth of Produce**

Irrigated gardens around country estates produced many types of fruits and vegetables: melons, figs, pomegranates, dates, onions, peas, chickpeas, beans, lentils, lettuces, leeks, cucumbers, cabbages, horseradish, spinach, turnips, carrots, eggplants, and radishes. Grapevines produced table grapes, raisins, and wine. Herb gardens featured dill, coriander, chicory, cumin, parsley, and
various varieties of mint (possibly including catnip). Juniper berries were grown as a spice.

The Egyptians pressed oils from sesame seeds and castor beans for cooking, flavoring foods, and making medicines and cosmetics. They pressed flax seeds for linseed oil. The most common oil was pressed from the fruit of the Moringa tree.

Rich or poor, people ate with their fingers. In wealthy households, servants poured water over their masters' hands between courses and offered clean linen towels to dry them.

Most households were well equipped with pottery jugs, pitchers, bowls, platters, and mugs. Wealthy families had sets of fancy dishes made of fine alabaster, schist, or other decorative stone.

Until the New Kingdom, there were no dining tables. Diners squatted on rush mats at low, multi-purpose tables, or stood up and picked food from bowls or platters on stands, buffet style. The elite of the New Kingdom sat on high stools at large tables, or they lay on couches while servants brought them food and drink.

**Personal Appearances**

![Image of ancient Egyptian clothing](image)

In the hot climate of Egypt, people wore simple, lightweight clothing such as this linen tunic.

Appearance, cleanliness, and good grooming were important. Even mummies were carefully groomed. Medical papyrus scrolls include formulas for preventing baldness, fighting wrinkles, and coloring gray hair. The Egyptians washed with natron-and-oil soaps, shaved with copper or bronze razors, and plucked stray hairs with copper or silver tweezers. They applied black eye paint (called kohl), scented oils, and deodorant made of powdered carob. They admired the results in hand-held mirrors made of highly-polished copper.

Egyptian clothing was light, simple, and elegant, especially in the Old and Middle Kingdoms. Egypt was almost always hot, so both men and women wore as little as possible. Men wore plain linen loincloths (a single piece of cloth wrapped around the hips).
that hung to the knees. Women wore simple linen dresses. Children generally ran about naked, wearing only amulets or magical symbols (often depicting the god Bes) to protect them from harm.

Many men shaved their heads. This was a sensible choice in a hot, dry, dusty, insect-infested land. Many women, including legendary beauty Nefertiti, did too. For dress-up, both men and women wore wigs made of human hair, or a mixture of hair and plant materials that was stiffened with beeswax. Wigs came in many styles. Some included braids, ribbons, and jeweled ornaments. Wig fashions came and went. Nefertiti favored a short, curly Nubian-style wig, which was widely copied by her subjects.

Children had shaved heads except for what was known as the "side-lock of youth" (also called the "Horus lock"). This was a narrow bunch of uncut hair hanging to one side of the face. The falcon-god Horus was the Egyptian model of the good son, and the Horus lock was worn as a reminder of Horus's role as a virtuous and devoted child. Cutting off of the side-lock was a special ritual when a child became an adult.

During the New Kingdom, enormous wealth flowed into Egypt. The elite wore colorful, elaborate clothing, jewelry, and personal decorations. Increased contact with the Near East, where colorful, ornamented textiles were popular, influenced fashions.

Women enjoyed the opportunity to dress up in elaborately pleated, embroidered, and decorated gowns, capes, and shawls in many colors. Men wore richly pleated kilts, capes, and long skirt-like garments with decorations and rich embroideries.

Even at their fanciest, Egyptian fashions were graceful, tasteful, and (almost) never overdone. Most clothing was made of natural-colored linen. Linen is spun and woven from a plant called flax, which was one of Egypt's major crops. Small figures and paintings show women in multicolored dresses with geometric patterns of red, yellow, and blue.

Egyptians went barefoot most of the time. During the prosperous years of the empire, royals and the elite completed their outfits with sandals made of rush or papyrus stalks, leather shoes, or leather slippers. Both men and women wore clothing and accessories made of wool and leather. But these materials were not considered pure in a religious sense because they came from animals, so leather and wool are seldom shown in art works.

**Making Cloth**

Most flax was spun and woven into linen cloth. Fine linen, torn into strips, wrapped mummified corpses. Flax was also spun and braided into durable rope. This rope was strong enough to haul multi-ton stone blocks.

Linen was one of Egypt's major exports, and it was in demand all over the world. It was woven in several grades, from coarse cloth to fine, almost see-through "royal linen" that was prized by wealthy ladies. Most linen was left its natural, off-white shade. Vegetable dyes were used to make yellow (safflower), red (madder), and blue (acacia tree bark) fabric.

In Predynastic times, the art of weaving fine linen on flat, horizontal looms was already well developed. The Hyksos introduced vertical looms. During the Nineteenth dynasty, a major linen manufacturing business was run by harem ladies and minor members of the royal family at a royal palace at Miwer in the Nile Delta.

Silk, a luxury reserved for only the wealthiest ladies, was not known until the Persian conquest in 525 BCE Cotton, for which modern Egypt is famous, was not grown until Roman times.

**Jewelry and Amulets**
Among the wealthy and royalty, elaborate jewelry was worn by both men and women. This neck collar, made of semiprecious stones, was found in the tomb of King Tutankhamun.

Everyone wore jewelry. The wealthy had rich ornaments made of gold and decorated precious stones such as with amethyst, turquoise, and lapis lazuli. Less wealthy folks wore strings or collars with faience beads and amulets. (Faience is pottery coated with brightly colored glazes.) Jewelry, especially amulets and charms, had magical and protective powers. Carnelian, turquoise, and lapis lazuli brought luck. Even the poorest peasant child wore a pottery or bone ring or amulet with a crude image of Bes.

Amulets magically attracted good luck and kept away evil. They protected the wearer from accidents, hunger and thirst, snakes, demons, and other everyday dangers. Amulets were made in many forms: scarabs (beetles) and the ankh (symbols of eternal life), animals, gods and goddesses, crowns, and the Eye of Horus (symbol of wholeness).

The Egyptians and Animals

Most Nile Valley animals were not dangerous. They were easy to hunt, herd, or domesticate. Egyptians trusted amulets and magic spells to protect themselves from the exceptions—crocodiles, scorpions, and several kinds of snakes with deadly bites.

When hippos were common, they caused much damage to crops and fields and were hunted as nuisances. Rats and mice that ate or ruined stored grain were a huge problem until the cat was domesticated during the Middle Kingdom.

Hunting and fishing in the marshes was a popular sport and a way to get food. Hunting for daily food became less important as farming and animal husbandry (raising domesticated animals) became widespread.

In Predynastic times, settlers rounded up the wild cows, bulls, oxen, gazelles, oryx, and goats that roamed the Nile Valley. They gathered them into farm and temple herds. Animals were raised for milk, skin, meat, and sacrifice to the gods. Geese, ducks, cranes, and pigeons were bred and fattened for food.

Hunters speared and netted fish. They brought down game birds with boomerang-like throw sticks. They captured birds for domestic flocks or to be fattened as religious sacrifices. Nobles and the wealthy hunted for sport. They took hippos, crocodiles, lions, leopards, antelopes, gazelles, ibexes, oryx, giraffes, and elephants.

The Egyptians cherished pet dogs and cats as companion animals. From ancient times, dogs guarded herds and helped hunters. Later Egyptians were great dog breeders, and developed dogs that looked much like modern Salukis. Dogs, usually depicted in the company of men, were named for their looks. Ebony or Big were common dog names.
Cats, who arrived in the Nile Valley during the Middle Kingdom, were originally prized for their ability to kill rodents and protect food supplies. But they were soon adopted as household pets. They not only controlled rats, mice, and snakes, but also offered companionship and pleasure. In Egyptian art, cats were usually shown with women.

After the Hyksos introduced horses, the Egyptians became famous horse breeders and charioteers. They did not ride the horses, however. Scholars believe the spines of their horses were too weak to support riders.

Sports, Games, and Fun

Egyptians loved competition. The work gangs building the Great Pyramid adopted team names and slogans, bragged about their own stone-hauling abilities, and teased other crews for being lazy. Farmers harvesting crops chose up sides and tried to outdo the other guys in how fast they brought in their grain.

The king and wealthy nobles sponsored sporting events. They provided equipment, announced winners, and awarded prizes such as special collars. Players wore uniforms and shouted down the calls of the referees. Participants were cheered not only for winning, but also for showing ability, grace, and good sportsmanship.

Older children and adults played games that resemble modern sports. These included handball, hockey, boxing and wrestling, long-distance running, weight lifting, long jump and vaulting, archery, javelin throw, fishing, and hunting. Drawings on tombs at Beni Hasan show a sport much like field hockey. Players had sticks made of palm branches, bent at the ends like hockey sticks. The ball was compressed papyrus fiber, covered in dyed leather. Rural Egyptians still play a similar game.

Egyptian team rowing was like modern rowing sports. The leader, sitting at the back of the rowboat, called out high-pitched, rhythmic signals to help all the rowers work as one and to encourage them to greater speed.

Long-distance running was a popular sport. It also had ritual significance for the king. As part of the heb-sed festival, the king ran a special course around the temple grounds. This ritual run confirmed that he was still physically and mentally fit to rule.

Maiherpra was a Nubian nobleman who was buried in the Valley of the Kings. His tomb was discovered in 1899. It contained a wealth of objects, including a painting of him playing a type of board game.

Egyptians enjoyed playing board games such as dog-and-jackal, mehen ("coiled serpent"), and senet. According to the Book of the Dead, they even played senet in the afterlife. Peter Piccione, professor of comparative ancient history at the College of
Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina, thinks they played *senet* both for fun and for religious reasons. *Senet* was played with bone or ivory pieces on a board with 30 squares. It enabled living players to communicate with the dead. When played in the afterlife, *senet* let the dead player's spirit move freely between heaven and earth. Four *senet* boards were found in Tutankhamun's tomb.

**Music and Dancing**

Music and dancing were originally part of religious rituals, but they quickly became popular in everyday life. The wealthy hired small orchestras and dancing girls to entertain at banquets. Musicians played wooden harps, flutes, pipes, clarinets, and trumpets. They clicked finger-clappers, shook the *sistrum*, and rattled their bead necklaces and other jewelry in time to the music. In later years, they played lyres, lutes, oboes, and tambourines—all introduced by the Hyksos.

The *sistrum*, was a hand-held instrument made of wires threaded with metal disks and beads. It was used in religious rituals, to accompany everyday music, and for magical purposes. The *sistrum's* shaking sounds were handy for driving away demons and bringing good luck to women in childbirth. The *sistrum* was sacred to the goddess Hathor.

The cat goddess Bastet is often shown in pictures rattling her *sistrum*. Many *sistra* include small cat figures.

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