Egyptian Social Structure
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Ancient Egypt was composed of several social classes, ranging from lives lived in slavery to positions of absolute power. The following text explores the social structure and government of this ancient civilization. As you read, take notes on this social structure of ancient Egypt; draw a diagram of what it was like based on your reading of the text.

Egyptian society was structured like a pyramid. At the top were the gods, such as Ra, Osiris, and Isis. Egyptians believed that the gods controlled the universe. Therefore, it was important to keep them happy. They could make the Nile overflow, cause famine, or even bring death.

The Egyptians also elevated some human beings to gods. Their leaders, called pharaohs, were believed to be gods in human form. They had absolute power over their subjects. After pharaohs died, huge stone pyramids were built as their tombs. Pharaohs were buried in chambers within the pyramids.

Because the people of Egypt believed that their pharaohs were gods, they entrusted their rulers with many responsibilities. Protection was at the top of the list. The pharaoh directed the army in case of a foreign threat or an internal conflict. All laws were enacted at the discretion of the pharaoh. Each farmer paid taxes in the form of grains, which were stored in the pharaoh’s warehouses. This grain was used to feed the people in the event of a famine.

The Chain of Command

No single person could manage all these duties without assistance. The pharaoh appointed a chief minister called a vizier as a supervisor. The vizier ensured that taxes were collected.

1. Ra was the sun god of ancient Egyptian myth and religion, and was often worshipped as the Creator god. Osiris was the god of resurrection and the dead, as well as ruler of the underworld. Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, was the goddess of women, fertility, motherhood, and children, as well as protector of the dead.

2. The Nile River, located in northeastern Africa, was an essential part of ancient Egyptian civilization, which mainly formed around this river that provided a source of water, transportation, trade, and farming land.

3. **Famine (noun):** extreme lack of food
4. **Elevate (verb):** to raise (in height, status, or esteem)
5. **Enact (verb):** to make or declare a law
6. **Discretion (noun):** the freedom or duty to decide what should be done in a particular situation
Working with the vizier were scribes who kept government records. These high-level employees had mastered a rare skill in ancient Egypt — they could read and write.

Noble Aims

Right below the pharaoh in status were powerful nobles and priests. Only nobles could hold government posts; in these positions they profited from tributes paid to the pharaoh. Priests were responsible for pleasing the gods.

Nobles enjoyed great status and also grew wealthy from donations to the gods. All Egyptians—from pharaohs to farmers—gave gifts to the gods.

Soldier On

Soldiers fought in wars or quelled domestic uprisings. During long periods of peace, soldiers also supervised the peasants, farmers, and slaves who were involved in building such structures as pyramids and palaces.

Skilled workers such as physicians and craftsmen/women made up the middle class. Craftsmen made and sold jewelry, pottery, papyrus products, tools, and other useful things.

Naturally, there were people needed to buy goods from artisans and traders. These were the merchants and storekeepers who sold these goods to the public.

The Bottom of the Heap

At the bottom of the social structure were slaves and farmers. Slavery became the fate of those captured as prisoners of war. In addition to being forced to work on building projects, slaves toiled at the discretion of the pharaoh or nobles.

Farmers tended the fields, raised animals, kept canals and reservoirs in good order, worked in the stone quarries, and built the royal monuments. Farmers paid taxes that could amount to as much as 60% of their yearly harvest—that's a lot of hay!

7. A vizier was the highest official below the pharaoh. Their responsibilities included supervising the country, gathering information from lower supervisors, managing taxes, recording trade, and advising the pharaoh.
8. A tribute is an official gift made periodically to a state or ruler, often to show gratitude or as payment for protection/service.
9. Quell (verb): to put an end to something, typically by force
10. Domestic (adjective): existing or occurring inside a particular country, as opposed to outside of it
11. Papyrus was a material prepared in ancient Egypt that was used in sheets for writing and painting on. It was also used in making rope, sandals, and boats.
12. Merchant (noun): a person who sells or trades goods
13. A canal is an artificial waterway made to allow the passage of boats and for the irrigation of land.
14. A reservoir is a large natural or manmade lake used as a source of water supply.
15. A quarry is a place, typically a deep pit, from which stone and other materials are mined.
Social mobility\textsuperscript{16} was not impossible. A small number of peasants and farmers moved up the economic ladder. Families saved money to send their sons to village schools to learn trades.\textsuperscript{17} These schools were run by priests or by artisans.\textsuperscript{18} Boys who learned to read and write could become scribes, then go on to gain employment in the government. It was possible for a boy born on a farm to work his way up into the higher ranks of the government. Bureaucracy\textsuperscript{19} proved lucrative.\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{16}“Social mobility” is a term used to describe the possibility for people to change their class or social status within society during their lifetime.

\textsuperscript{17} Trade (noun): a skilled job, typically one that requires manual skills and special training

\textsuperscript{18} Artisan (noun): a worker in a skilled trade, especially one that involves making things by hand

\textsuperscript{19} Bureaucracy (noun): a system of government in which most of the important decisions are made by state officials rather than elected representatives; pertaining to the administration of a government

\textsuperscript{20} Lucrative (adjective): producing a great deal of profit; rewarding, successful
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
   A. Being a soldier was only a temporary social status in times of conflict or war.
   B. The middle class was the largest population group in ancient Egyptian civilization and thus held the most influence.
   C. The social structure of Egypt resembled its famous stone pyramids: smaller, more valued classes at the top and the larger, less valued classes at the base.
   D. There was almost no way to change one's class; people, especially slaves, were locked in their status for life.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “Egyptian society was structured like a pyramid.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “During long periods of peace, soldiers also supervised the peasants, farmers, and slaves who were involved in building such structures as pyramids and palaces.” (Paragraph 8)
   C. “Skilled workers such as physicians and craftsmen/women made up the middle class.” (Paragraph 9)
   D. “Slavery became the fate of those captured as prisoners of war.” (Paragraph 11)

3. PART A: What does the word “toil” most likely mean as used in paragraph 11? [RI.4]
   A. To entertain
   B. To worship strongly
   C. To work extremely hard
   D. To become exhausted

4. PART B: Which of the following phrases best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “At the bottom of the social structure” (Paragraph 11)
   B. “captured as prisoners of war” (Paragraph 11)
   C. “being forced to work on building projects” (Paragraph 11)
   D. “at the discretion of the pharaoh or nobles” (Paragraph 11)
5. In complete sentences, summarize the structure of the ancient Egyptian system of government. How were different social classes involved in this government? Cite evidence from the text.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In your opinion, what was the best class or position to have in ancient Egyptian society? What were the potential drawbacks of this class?

2. In the context of this passage, can you change your identity? How were the people of ancient Egypt able to change their identity? Would it be enough to make a difference? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of this passage, what is fair? Would you consider the social structure of ancient Egypt overall fair? Can you compare it to any other class systems in history? How does it compare to your country's or society's own social structure? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.