

CHAPTER IX

Ancient Egyptian Society

I. THE KING

THE OFT-QUOTED EPIGRAM of Hecataeus, that Egypt is the gift of the Nile, is still true, but Ancient Egypt was no less the creation of the Pharaoh. The origins of the kingship go back to prehistoric days when the nomads of North Africa were still dependent upon rain for the fertility of their pastures, their herds, and themselves, and rain-makers played a vital role in tribal life. The earliest kings are shown in the habit of a pastoral chieftain, carrying the crook and flail-like *ladanisterion*, wearing an animal tail at their backs, and the beard of their goat-flocks on their chins. For solemn occasions this remained their ceremonial dress throughout history. Like all such divine kings, in prehistoric times they were ritually killed when their powers began to wane, and their corpses were probably dismembered and buried, or burnt and the ashes scattered for the greater fertility of the land. By historic times this savage rite had been replaced by such magic ceremonies designed to rejuvenate the monarch as the Jubilee Festival, or substitutes were provided such as animals, mock-kings, and probably persons drowned by chance in the Nile. But the tradition that the king should die for his people persisted in folk-lore and in the more primitive spells of *The Pyramid Texts*; and there are anthropologists who believe that the ceremonial killing of the Pharaoh was sometimes revived in moments of crisis, as with the last ruler of Egypt, Cleopatra, who ended her life by means of the personal god of the king, the uraeus.

The functions of kingship are seen quite clearly at the very start of Pharaonic Egypt on a mace-head and a ceremonial palette, both originally from Hierakonpolis. On the former,

Plates 5, 7, 54

Plates 7, 20, 23

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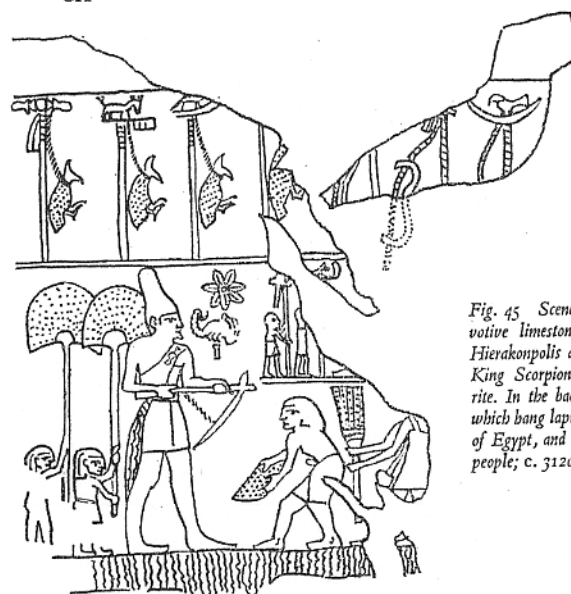


Fig. 45 Scene in relief on a fragmentary volute limestone mace-head, excavated at Hierakonpolis and now at Oxford, showing King Scorpion performing an agricultural rite. In the background are standards from which hang lapwings symbolizing the people of Egypt, and a bow representing a foreign people; c. 3120 B.C. Scale, 3 : 8

King Scorpion is shown performing a solemn rite, subsequently associated with the Osirian shawabti-figures, of clearing the irrigation channels after the receding of the inundation and spreading the fertile silt over the fields. The prehistoric rain-maker who kept his tribe, their crops, and beasts in good health by exercising a magic control over the weather, has thus been transformed into the Pharaoh, able to sustain the entire nation by having command over the Nile flood. From now on, the kingship and the Nile are intimately associated. Even Akhenaten, whose sole god was a sun-god, is apostrophized as 'this myriad of Niles', and as 'a Nile which flows daily giving life to Egypt'. Several instances exist where the Pharaohs acted as water-diviners when wells had to be dug in desert

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places. Ramesses II was thought to have special influence over the elements even in the far-off lands of the Hittites, where he could make rain fall or withhold it at his pleasure. This power over water (and what was rain but a Nile set in the sky by a beneficent god for those lesser nations that did not enjoy a terrestrial Nile!) was supposed not to cease with a king's death but to be transferred to Osiris with whom the deceased had mingled.

It is scarcely an exaggeration to claim for the other antiquity from Hierakonpolis, the palette of King Narmer, that it is the most important Pharaonic monument to have been discovered in Egypt. Here in essence is expressed the entire character of the kingship, its symbols, its dogma, and its art. The King's name appears at the top within a palace building and is flanked by the heads of Hathor with her woman's face emerging from a cow's head, so representing a complicated concept of the sky as a star-speckled cow and the foster-mother of mankind and also the mother of the sky-god Horus of whom the King is an incarnation. The reverse, illustrated in Plate 5, shows Narmer as a figure of heroic proportions in his medicine-man's garb, frozen into a stance which was to remain sacrosanct for as long as Pharaonic art persisted, and sacrificing a foe before a rebus of the hawk-god Horus leading captive a marsh-land. Below, two Asiatics¹ lie fallen. The other side of the palette shows further scenes of victory, and the whole object commemorates the divine might of Narmer who triumphs over foreign enemies as well as rebels at home. The same theme is expressed a little more symbolically on the Scorpion mace-head where in the background standards appear with lapwings and bows hanging from them. On a statue-base from the Step Pyramid, Djoser is shown treading down nine bows symbolizing the neighbours of Egypt, and being worshipped by submissive lapwings representing the native populace. At this

¹ Y. Yadin: *Israel Exploration Journal*, v, pp. 1-16.

Plate 5

cf. Plate 68

cf. Plate 66

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early stage, there is no distinction between the peoples of Egypt and those of adjacent lands who are all prostrate beneath the Pharaoh as an omnipotent god. The disproportionate sizes of the King, his subjects, and even the image of the god, upon these early monuments clearly show that the Pharaoh is to be regarded as a universal god in his own right rather than the human agent of a god. It is in this that Egypt presents us with a typically African solution of political problems. The other high civilizations that had arisen in river valleys during the Bronze Age and knew the arts of writing and recording, remained a congeries of rival city-states while Egypt displayed a national conformity personified in her divine king. For the Pharaoh is the classic example of the god incarnate as king. In Egypt in the earliest period he is perhaps to be regarded as 'the Greatest God' after whose human image the other gods gradually transpose themselves from their primitive animal or fetishistic forms in the manner of Hathor. The idea of a tangible god appealed particularly to the Egyptian need for a concrete image of reality, but the divine influence of the Pharaoh was recognized far afield in a world which had little of nationalism in its loyalties. The Pharaoh claimed sovereignty over Egyptian and foreigner alike, and both combined to do him homage at his advent. The painted walls of the Theban tomb-chapels of the New Kingdom have left us the clearest pictures of this ceremony when princes from Asia and Africa and the 'Isles of the Great Green' set out on a Magi-like journey to lay their gifts at the feet of the newly crowned king, and beg from him 'the breath of life', uniting in this devotion with the people of Egypt itself. The bows and lapwings on the monuments of Scorpion, and the designs on the palette of Narmer suggest that this relationship between Pharaoh and mortal had existed from the dawn of history at least.

Large-scale irrigation and land-reclamation projects do not seem to have been inaugurated until a centralized State under

Plate 51

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the rule of a sole king had been developed. The earliest kings were associated with the control of the flood-waters, and the dramatic change that the political unification of Egypt must have effected in co-ordinating and accelerating all kinds of activities may at the time have seemed miraculous. Just as the destructive power of the inundation could be transformed into a beneficent force, so by the same Pharaonic control the affairs of men could be regulated for good. The precedents created by Narmer were followed by his successors not as a recipe for success but as part of an inevitable order. The king was the personification of *ma'at*, a word which we translate as 'rightness' or 'truth' or 'justice', but which also seems to have the meaning of 'the natural cosmic order'. The forces of evil could upset *ma'at* until restoration had been effected by some appropriate act—a magic rite, or the advent of a new king. The means by which the king established *ma'at* were his 'Authoritative Utterance' and his 'Understanding'. Since he ruled as a god, all things, all persons were his, and the law was his pronouncement. This does not mean that he ruled arbitrarily, though it was a fiction that he consulted only his own 'heart'; also he might take heed of the oracle of a god. A necessarily heavy weight of precedent formed the body of *ma'at*, so that it was only occasionally that the Pharaoh could boast of something the like of which had not been done since the primeval time when the gods ruled. The strict regulation of the Pharaoh's life is suggested by the words of Diodorus: 'For there was a set time not only for his holding audience or rendering judgement, but even for his taking a walk, bathing and sleeping with his wife; in short, for every act of his life.'

This concept of the Pharaoh as the god Horus incarnate reached its fullest development in the Early Old Kingdom, and probably the Step Pyramid and the pyramids at Giza stand as its greatest memorials when the entire nation undertook the tremendous activity involved in raising and equipping

these giant monuments not for the sole benefit of their human ruler, but to ensure the persistence of their greatest divinity with which their very existence was identified. But already during Dynasty IV the influence of Heliopolis was making itself felt and became dominant in the next dynasty. The Pharaoh now came to be regarded as a descendant of the sun-god Re who had ruled Egypt in the beginning. There was a subtle shift of emphasis from the idea of an incarnation to the idea of the physical son of a god. A folk-story, for instance, concerned with the founding of Dynasty V explains how Re fathered the first kings of this dynasty upon the wife of a mere High Priest of Heliopolis. By the end of the Old Kingdom, however, another aspect was also being emphasized and the living Pharaoh was regarded as an incarnation of the great god Horus who on death became Osiris while his son stood in his place as the new Horus. The kingship, rather than its incumbent, was immortal, the Egyptian universe being created anew in the old pattern with each change of king. This cosmogony was reinforced by the Osirian myth which taught that an ancient divine king had suffered death and dismemberment but arose from the dead to be king and judge in the underworld, while his posthumously begotten son Horus ruled in his father's stead on earth.

The concept of the king as the supreme god incarnate was sadly weakened during the First Intermediate Period when the exclusiveness of the Pharaoh was replaced by a multiplicity of local kinglets who boasted less of their divinity than of their ability to preserve their people by their temporal might. This concern for the material well-being of their subjects was carried over into the tenets of government during the Middle Kingdom when the idea took hold that the king tended his subjects as a good shepherd watched his flock. 'For God has made me the herdsman of this land for he knew that I would maintain it in order for him', said Sesostris I to his assembled courtiers. 'He

cf. Plate 72

is possessed of graciousness, rich in benignity, and through love has he conquered', said Sinuhe of this same King. Though the Pharaohs of Dynasty XII restored the prestige of the kingship it was more as an invincible champion than as a god that the 'Living Horus' was regarded. Much of the reverence for the Pharaoh as the greater-god-to-be had passed to that deification of kingship, Osiris, despite the weight of a tradition that still gave the terrestrial ruler and his family sumptuous burial in a pyramid-tomb.

The kings of Dynasties XVII and XVIII had to fight their way to power by hard campaigning against all rivals, and with their eventual triumph they found themselves ruling with unchallenged authority. The character of the monarchy during the New Kingdom is distinctly martial. The Pharaoh himself took the field at the head of his troops and it is as a divine war-lord, the incarnation of Menthu or Baal, that he now appears. His heroic stature is carefully emphasized by his prowess in rowing, shooting, riding, and hunting. It is a convention that he should disregard the cautious advice of his counsellors and devise a bold and dangerous plan which is crowned with resounding success. The victories of the military genius Tuthmosis III raised the authority of the kingship to new heights and it is his vizier Rekhmire who refers to the king as 'the god by whose guidance men live, the father and mother of mankind, unique, without a peer'. Similarly, the father-in-law of Akhenaten refers to him as 'this god who made me'. With Amenophis III and his colossal monuments, such as the temple at Soleb where he worships himself among other gods, the kingship reached the high-water mark of its prestige during the New Kingdom. His son Amenophis IV who, in deference to his promotion of the cult of the sun-god, the Aten, changed his name to Akhenaten, created his god in the king's image. The Aten was the heavenly king *par excellence*, and the Pharaoh was at once his son and co-regent

Fig. 4, Plate 48



Fig. 46 Officials of the royal harem bending low in the presence of the royal pair; after a relief in the tomb of Ramose No. 55 at Thebes; c. 1368 B.C. Scale, 1 : 9

in whose presence the courtiers bow lower than ever before. Parallels with the old sun-cult of Heliopolis can be traced in this concept; what was new was the insistence that the Aten was intangible and the only god. Monotheism was a novel and alien idea in Egypt which instinctively tolerated so many diverse and concrete forms of deity; yet the authority of the Pharaoh was such that even this revolutionary principle was apparently accepted, if not understood, by a devout people who dutifully hammered out the name of the rival heavenly king Amun and his consort and suppressed the plural form of 'god' wherever they appeared.

This vicious persecution of Amun and other cults may in fact give us the clue to the true character of this curious interlude in Egyptian history. The god incarnate was unfortunately subject to the ills that mortal flesh is heir to. Amenophis III suffered miserably from dental caries; Siptah had a club foot Ramesses V died of smallpox; Merenptah was grossly obese

Plate 46

Akhenaten presents us with the unique case of a Pharaoh who did not abide by the rules, and could only have flouted them because he was not fully sane, though until the skull believed to be his is re-subjected to expert examination by pathologists the absolute proof will be lacking. At least he was given a quiet and quasi-private burial at Thebes by his intimates. A few years afterwards, his successor Tut-ankh-amun described the conditions that faced him when he came to the throne with *ma'at* (see p. 161, above) overthrown, the temples neglected, the priesthoods dispersed, the people demoralized, lacking divine comfort and direction, and the armies of Egypt defeated abroad. The picture is traditionally overdrawn but the failure of Akhenaten must have dealt a considerable blow to the idea of the infallible character of the kingship in Egypt, for a decade later we find that the widow of Tut-ankh-amun is demeaning herself, as she confesses, by asking for a Hittite prince to become her consort, and therefore Pharaoh, so as to carry on the line of Ahmose, the chastiser of Asiatics.

Plate 48

The kingship during the New Kingdom was closely identified with the military policies of conquest abroad and keeping inviolate the borders of Egypt. It was a concept geared only to success and could but decline as the affairs of Egypt herself began to totter. New and vigorous races with superior weapons challenged successfully her military supremacy; dynastic squabbles, low Niles, and increasing impoverishment dealt the idea a mortal blow. In the Late Period the kingship became but a prize for which foreigners—Libyans, 'Ethiopians', Persians, and Greeks—fought each other. While the weight of traditional thought made it certain that there would always be tremendous respect paid to the kingship especially in Court circles, the fact is that men turned more to the worship of gods in the form of kings, to Amun, Re-Harakhte, and Osiris. Prayers were addressed to gods less and less through the

intermediary of the king and more through the agency of the city-god, while for the great mass of the people, as the cult of the god incarnate in the king declined, the worship of animals increased to grotesque proportions.¹ The greatness of Ancient Egypt was indissolubly bound up with her kings who had created it: they rose and fell together.

2. THE ROYAL FAMILY

The queen who had conceived the Pharaoh of the divine seed was obviously exceptionally privileged among the royal women. In all systems where the king is divine, a supernatural potential is induced in all his progeny. The eldest son of the Pharaoh by his principal consort became his heir. His eldest daughter by the same queen, the Royal heiress, was no less important since in Egypt a matriarchal system of inheritance seems to have persisted, in the Royal family at least. The dowry of the Royal heiress evidently comprised the kingdom, or perhaps the actual throne, itself an object of great sanctity as elsewhere in Africa today. It was desirable therefore in order to keep the divine essence undiluted that the Royal heir and heiress should marry each other, a full brother-sister relationship that is particularly well attested in Ptolemaic times, but for which there is no evidence among the rest of the Egyptian populace. Owing to the vagaries of infant mortality in Egypt, even among Royalty, this consummation was seldom achieved and it was often the son by a secondary wife or concubine who married the heiress, to become Crown Prince. The widow of

¹ Since earliest days, the Egyptians had held that on death they could become effective spirits (*akhu*) assuming any desired shape. In the Late Period this seems to have been modified into a belief in the transmigration of souls, as reported by Herodotus. According to this idea, the soul passed through a definite cycle of rebirth from humans through animals and back to humans again. Such a belief would fully account for the exaggerated respect, not worship, accorded to certain animals in Graeco-Roman days.

Tutankhamun believed that by marrying her even a foreigner could be made a Pharaoh, and in fact her eventual second husband, the Vizier Ay who was not of Royal blood, became the next king apparently by this marriage of convenience. So powerful was the privilege that the heiress possessed of conferring the right to the throne, that Queen Hatshepsut evidently felt in the absence of full brothers on the death of her consort that she had a better right to rule than the next heir, Tuthmosis III, and was able to usurp supreme power. Though this was evidently regarded by her successors as a heresy, there are other examples of similar pretensions on the part of queens, notably by Tawosret of Dynasty XIX, and the last rulers of Dynasties VI and XII.

Occasionally, it appears, no heiress was born to or survived the king and his principal wife. This seems to have happened in the case of Amenophis III who married into a different family, perhaps a collateral branch, as did his son Amenophis IV. Yet each King subsequently consolidated his claims by marrying the first eligible heiress, his own daughter by the principal wife.

We are ill-informed about the careers of Royal sons, and particularly crown princes, before Dynasty XIX. It would appear that all the Royal sons received the education of a potential Pharaoh since no one could know whom fate had in store for the succession. There are several instances of heirs apparent who did not survive their fathers. Tuthmosis III, though the son of Tuthmosis II by a secondary wife, was singled out for the kingship by the oracle of Amun. Tuthmosis IV was similarly promised the succession by Re-Harakhte. In both cases it is highly probable that no one was left with a better claim. There are occasions on which a king associated his eldest son on the throne with him as co-regent and the system is well attested for Dynasty XII. It may be that a well-regulated system of co-regency existed from the beginning, but

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as the Pharaohs were usually very reticent about this practice, the evidence is difficult to extract.

3. THE HIGH OFFICIALS

In theory all government was by the king: in practice, of course, he ruled through officials. In the earliest dynasties these appear to have been his near relatives; for, since authority came from the gods, those who partook even in some small degree of the divine essence were best qualified for subordinate rule. In time, offices tended to become hereditary as the Egyptian ideal of appointing the heir to his father's place was generally followed. Veritable dynasties of officials existed by the side of the kings they served; and the genealogies of some may be traced for several generations, particularly in the New Kingdom. During the First Intermediate Period and earlier Middle Kingdom, the local governors duplicated the Royal administration on a smaller scale with their stewards, priests, and henchmen. The military State of the New Kingdom, however, was much more highly organized by a bureaucracy which is usually regarded as having no connexion with the ruling house, though the proofs are lacking. At least many of the officials had daughters in the Royal harem. No particular specialization was demanded in earlier times: thus Weni of Dynasty VI (see p. 97, above), whose training was as a steward, became in turn a judge, general, master of works, and hydraulic engineer. Ability as an organizer was apparently of more value than technical knowledge; and this remained true throughout Egyptian history. Amenophis-son-of-Hapu, for instance, whose primary office was an administrative post in the War Department, was also the architect who moved 'mountains of quartzite', as he put it, in erecting the colossal monuments of Amenophis III.

The king as the origin and fount of all law was the final

Plate 49

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court of appeal. Death-sentences could apparently be confirmed only by him and he must also have exercised prerogatives of mercy. His deputy was the vizier who was appointed or confirmed in office, together with the other high officials, at the king's advent when a traditional homily was addressed to them by the Pharaoh enjoining upon them certain principles which they were to follow, and defining their duties. The vizier was told that the responsibilities of his office were heavy, but that he was the mainstay of the entire land and must be scrupulous in administering the law, neither favouring friends, nor judging their cases more harshly because they were his friends, 'for that would be more than justice'. It has often been pointed out, however, that there is very little reference to a legal code in all this. The king was at once the legislator, judiciary, and executive, but in such a State as Egypt where the pattern of government was constantly repeated, precedent must have played a cardinal role, and a body of decisions with all the sanctity of holy writ must have been available to form the climate of Royal opinion, if not actually to affect judgements in individual cases. Even in the reign of Tuthmosis III, decisions taken by a vizier who had lived some five centuries earlier, were still recalled. There were also the *Instructions* which several kings wrote for the guidance of their posterity, and these too would form a sort of *aide-memoire*, to give them no higher function.

In the New Kingdom an appointment perhaps of even greater importance than the post of vizier was that of the Viceroy of Ethiopia, or Prince of Kush. This official was the king's deputy in the region from el-Kab to Napata, and received the king's signet as a token of his delegated power. Though little is known about how incumbents were chosen, there is more than a suspicion that while a son of King Ahmosis may have been the first viceroy in the New Kingdom, the office soon became hereditary.



Fig. 47 The Chief of the Treasury hands over the King's signet to Huy, the Viceroy of Kush, after a painting in the tomb of Huy No. 40 at Thebes; c. 1345 B.C. Scale, 1 : 8

In the funeral procession painted in the tomb-chapel of the Vizier Ramose, we see the Prince of Kush followed by the First Herald, doubtless representing the King himself, and then the Overseer of the Treasury, a department of State as important as the judiciary. All goods and produce belonged to the Pharaoh and were distributed only by his agents. A trade in local products existed, of course, carried on from village to village on a barter system but until the Late New Kingdom, inter-State trading, like the expeditions to Punt or Byblos, was represented one-sidedly as the reception of tribute. Yet the Amarna correspondence makes it clear that the 'tribute' sent by the Pharaoh in exchange was no less valuable. The State economy was largely dependent upon the tithes collected from the land-owning institutions or individuals, whether they were large temples or veteran soldiers settled upon the land.

The taxes were in kind: barley, wheat, oil, wine, linen, fish, fruit, cattle, and so forth. The land belonged to the king and private property was created only when he made gifts. Similarly, exemptions from taxation were secured only by Royal ordinance. While land could be bequeathed to the owner's legate, the transaction had to be ratified by Royal decree. Farm-land could apparently also be rented by tenants. A cadastre of lands was kept in the office of the vizier, and the great Wilbour Papyrus in the Brooklyn Museum shows how meticulous the land measurements and tax assessments were in Ramesside times. There is no reason to believe that they were any less precise in earlier days. A great body of officials was employed in estimating and measuring the yield of harvests and collecting, storing, and allocating the State tithes. In a State which did not have a monetary system, these taxes met the needs of the officials, craftsmen, priests, and all classes of the community not engaged upon food production.

Plate 52

4. THE ARMED FORCES

The king, as the Narmer palette makes evident, was the protector of Egypt, producing concord at home and making the State enemies his footstool abroad. His divine might alone was sufficient to conquer: in the face of his superior right, his opponents became weak and submissive. In practice, the Pharaoh was assisted in police and military matters by an army. During the later Old Kingdom, this probably consisted of local levies under their regional commanders; and it was but a short step from these to the feudal lords and their retainers that brought the miseries of civil strife to the kingdom at the collapse of Dynasty VI. There must also have been a Royal corps or bodyguard of Egyptian and Nubian troops stronger than any equivalent local force. The duties of such levies were concerned largely with police work on the frontiers,

Plate 5

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quarrying operations in Sinai, the Wadi Hammamat, and elsewhere, and in trading expeditions to Punt. They combined the duties of a labour-corps and a protective force.

During the Middle Kingdom, the private armies of the preceding period were still tolerated until the reign of Sesostri III; and the central force of the king himself was just such a body on a larger scale, recruited by conscription but with a quota of Nubian volunteers around a nucleus of the personal retainers of the king. This army, which campaigned on a regular basis in Nubia where it also garrisoned the trading-forts, was much more highly organized than the forces of former days. Its duties still included public works and quarrying operations, besides field-service, and it was doubtless the increasing professionalism of this Army that enabled Sesostri III to suppress the last pretensions of the local barons.

The forces of the Old and Middle Kingdoms, however, have a thoroughly amateur appearance beside the large armies of the New Kingdom with their chariotry, infantry, scouts, and marines. The Theban war-lords had emerged victorious from the struggle with Hyksos and native rivals, and the character of their rule thereafter is quasi-military. Even at the Court of the unwarlike Akhenaten soldiers are prominent among the onlookers. The Army was organized into four divisions of about five thousand men each; and as this was doubtless too large a force for the population of Egypt itself to support without strain, it gradually came to be composed more and more of mercenaries—Nubians, Asiatics, Sea-peoples, and Libyans. At the Battle of Kadesh, Ramesses II had in his army a contingent of Sardinians who had been captured in previous wars; and both Nubian and Libyan prisoners could win freedom by taking service in the Pharaonic forces. A career in the Army in fact was the only opportunity for an adventurous but uneducated man, either Egyptian or alien, to achieve a position of importance or affluence. By

Plate 21

Fig. 52

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enlisting as an ordinary soldier he might rise by merit to the rank of a standard-bearer, then to a company commander, and lastly to a captain of bowmen or marines. From such field-officers were chosen the police officials, sports instructors for the Royal princes, even major-domos of the princesses, and holders of other Court sinecures. Many veterans were pensioned off with grants of farm-land, valuable gold decorations, and captives as servants.

The highest staff posts in the Army, however, were open only to the educated man who might begin his career as a simple scribe acting either at home or in the field as a sort of pay-clerk. From having charge of accounts and stores, he could pass to chief army-clerk, concerned with keeping the war-diary, with reports and general secretarial work. A further elevation would be to scribe of recruits, a very important post held for example by Amenophis-son-of-Hapu, who superintended conscription and the allocation of recruits to various services, either in the Army proper or the public works for which the Army supplied labour. The General Staff was concerned more with logistics than strategy. The Supreme Commander was the Pharaoh himself, who often delegated his authority to a deputy, usually the Crown Prince. Before a campaign the Pharaoh consulted a War Council of general officers and high State officials, though the bold and successful plan is accredited entirely to the king. The General Staff gained an unrivalled experience in the handling of large numbers of men and in organization and methods. It was perhaps for this reason that they were regarded as the best qualified to take over the kingship at different times during Dynasty XVIII, when after the deaths of Amenophis I and Tut-ankh-amun no heirs in the direct line of descent were living. Ay, Haremhab, Ramesses I, and Sethos I had all been trained as staff officers in the Army. At the end of the Ramesside period when the country was drifting into anarchy,

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it was the Army officers Penhasi and Herihor who stepped in apparently to restore order; and thereafter the military secure such a hold that they were able to form a powerful caste without whose support no Pharaoh could rule, until Greek mercenaries were employed to neutralize them.

5. THE SCRIBES

For all these posts in the highly centralized administration officials were required who could read and write; and the first necessity of any man who wished to follow a professional career was that he should be properly educated in one of the schools attached to a palace or temple where books were copied and formal instruction given. Humbler village scribes would doubtless teach their own children, and might also take a number of pupils from near relatives. The wealth of school exercises that has survived at Deir el-Medina and elsewhere suggests that the scribes found time to take advanced pupils as well as follow their calling.

If we are to judge by the career of the High Priest Bakenkhor in the reign of Ramesses II, instruction began at the age of four and was completed twelve years later. In learning the classic utterance of the Middle Kingdom, which was used for so many monumental and literary purposes down to Graeco-Roman days, the pupil of a later day had to wrestle with a language which was already dead and which he understood very imperfectly as his copies of the classics clearly reveal. It is often only in such garbled forms that Egyptian literature has come down to us.

The pupil began by learning by heart the different glyphs grouped into various categories, and from that he progressed to words in the literary language selected according to meaning. From this stage he went on to copy extracts from the classics, sometimes translating them into the vernacular language.

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Papyrus was too expensive for beginners to spoil and potsherds and flakes of limestone (*ostraka*) had to serve instead. The instruction in reading and writing comprised other subjects as well. The writing of the various glyphs demanded an ability to draw with the pen. Geography, mathematics, foreign words, articles of trade, travelling equipment, religious feasts, parts of the body, and so forth, were learnt incidentally in copying stock-letters, poems on the King and his Residences, and the various exchanges in a literary controversy between two learned scribes. Learning without tears may have been the ideal in some respects, although the Egyptians also had a Tudor belief in the efficacy of corporal punishment and the pupil was told that if he was idle he would be soundly thrashed. It is not surprising that under such treatment, and obsessed with the tedium of learning, the schoolboy should have thought of running away to become a soldier or charioteer or farmer; and repeatedly by means of such homilies as *The Satire on Trades* the teacher sought to make his pupils stick to their dull tasks, comparing the easy lot of the trained scribe with the miseries of other callings. The theme is usually that the profession of scribe leads to a comfortable well-paid job: but some hint of the pleasure of learning for its own sake is given in the injunction to 'acquire this high calling of scribe; pleasant and fruitful are your pen and papyrus roll, and happy are you the livelong day'. There is evidence that some girls were taught to read and write, for profit as well as pleasure. A word for a female scribe exists by the time of the Middle Kingdom at least, and a more emphatic expression is current in the Late Period. Writing-palettes of two of Akenaten's daughters have survived and there is a graffito in the Step Pyramid with a sneering reference to the literary efforts of women.

When the scribe had graduated from school he had his foot on the first rung of a career in the higher ranks of the Army, the Treasury, or the Palace. He might become anything

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The Egyptians

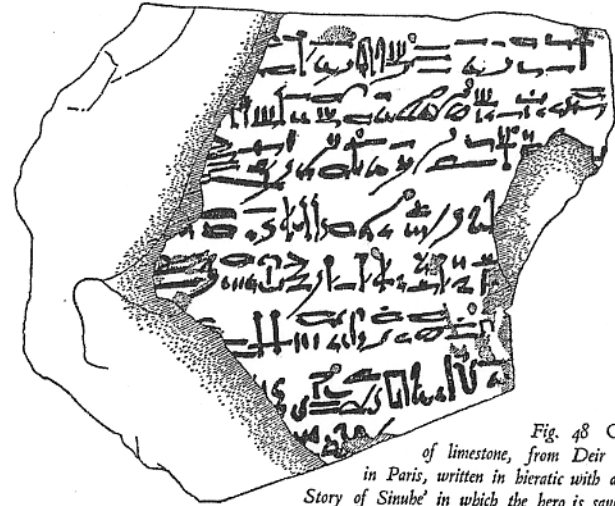


Fig. 48 Ostrakon, or flake of limestone, from Deir el-Medina and now in Paris, written in hieratic with a passage from 'The Story of Sinuhe' in which the hero is saved by Bedouin from death in the desert and travels to Byblos and beyond; c. 1150 B.C. Length 7½ in.

Plate 40

according to his talents, from the king's private secretary to the village letter-writer and petty attorney. It would help, of course, if he could follow his father in his chosen occupation, but occasionally a man from humble circumstances was able to rise by merit to a position of authority. Some of the high officers of State during the New Kingdom boast of their lowly birth, and though in most cases they exaggerate in order to flatter the king who had advanced them, nevertheless such a factotum as Sennemut did come from modest antecedents, his father having only a vague, and probably posthumous, title of 'worthy'.

A training as a scribe was also a necessary preliminary to a career in such professions as medicine, the priesthood, and art and architecture. A medical student would be apprenticed to

a practitioner, almost always his father or some near relative; but an ability to read was necessary for learning the various prescriptions, spells, and diagnoses contained in medical papyri, whether the work in question were a quasi-scientific treatise on surgery and fractures such as the Edwin Smith Papyrus, or a specialist work on gynaecology such as the Kahun Papyrus, or a mere collection of medico-magic recipes, nostrums, and incantations such as the Ebers Papyrus.

During the Old and Middle Kingdoms the priesthood had been a largely amateur organization, the district worthy being the chief priest *ex officio* of the local god, though he may have been assisted by a number of full-time subordinate priests. During the New Kingdom, however, with the considerable resources that were lavished upon such State gods as Amun of Thebes, Ptah of Memphis, and Re-Harakhte of Heliopolis, the priesthood became a highly specialized profession. The chief priests are great secular administrators as well as ecclesiastics. Thus Amun had not only four prophets or high priests, and a host of minor officiants down to bearers of floral offerings, but a complete secular establishment, a Chief Steward and Overseers of his Granary, Store-houses, Cattle, Huntsmen, Peasants, Weavers, Craftsmen, Goldsmiths, Sculptors, Shipwrights, Draughtsmen, Records, and Police, a veritable enclave within the Pharaonic State. All these posts and their subordinate offices had to be filled with trained scribes, though the degree of their proficiency naturally varied.

It is more difficult to determine whether the training of a scribe was demanded of artists and craftsmen who are so largely represented as working anonymously in studios attached to the palaces and temples. It is clear that sculptors and painters need not have been able to read or write so long as they could copy on a large scale what was drawn on an *ostrakon* or papyrus by a master-scribe or draughtsman. Models of hieroglyphs were supplied in plaster for ignorant workmen to copy

Plates 67, 53

Fig. 15

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at Amarna, and there is plenty of evidence from this same site that stock subjects and texts were copied mechanically from year to year even when they were out of date, and if corrected at all, only after they had been cut into the stone. During the Middle Kingdom many *ex votos* were mass-produced at Abydos, for instance, by craftsmen who could not write, the inscription usually being feebly scratched on by a hand more used to wielding a pen than a chisel. From this and other evidence it is usually argued that the artist was of little account, a despised and humble workman devilling away for a literate official who took all the credit. Such judgements, however, ignore the essentially objective approach of the ancient craftsman to his work. It is inconceivable that the Ancient Egyptians, who were the most artistic nation of the Ancient World and of whom it may justly be said that nothing they touched they did not adorn, should not have valued high artistic skill. There is a suggestion in a text that Tuthmosis III may have designed stone vessels, and it seems almost certain that the extraordinary mannerism of Amarna art can only have originated in the imagination of Akhenaten himself. The fact is that especially in the earlier periods it was seldom that artists proclaimed their calling: they preferred to masquerade under such titles as the High Priest of Ptah. Several Court artists were given handsome tombs at Thebes by their grateful sovereigns. Parennefer was honoured by a tomb at Amarna as well as at Thebes where he is prouder of his title of the king's cupbearer than that of chief craftsman of the king. In his interesting biography, the king's architect Nekhebu of Dynasty VI mentions only incidentally the fact that he began

Plate 46
Fig. 4

cf. Plate 71



Fig. 49 Yuti, the chief sculptor of Queen Tiy (see Plate 44), putting the finishing touches to a statuette of her daughter Beket-aten; after a relief in the tomb of Huyu at Amarna; c. 1357 B.C. Scale, 1 : 4

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his career by acting as secretary to his brother, an Overseer of Works; and the evidence that he had received the training of a scribe is missing from the list of his many titles.

6. PEASANTS AND WORKERS

The cleavage between the scribal *élite* and the uneducated masses was wide and deep. Several sages exhort their posterity not to be arrogant because of their knowledge. The Vizier Ptah-hotep claims that a good discourse is rarer than precious stone, yet it is found with serving-girls at the mill-stones. But too often, especially with the petty official, the view prevailed that the scribe existed to drive the ignorant man like a pack-ass. The liability of the common man to be directed by his betters is seen in the operation of the *corvée*, a system which had existed from earliest days whereby all the able-bodied men could be called out in critical times as during the harvest and inundation to toil on public works such as the raising of dykes or the clearing of channels to control the flood. Unskilled labour was also conscripted to accompany remote quarrying expeditions. A similar impress was doubtless employed for hauling cut stone in the building of the pyramids, probably during the inundation when the peasantry were largely unemployed. That any considerable body of rural labour could have been withdrawn permanently from the fields without endangering the economy of the country is extremely improbable. The dragomans' stories of the building of the Giza pyramids, current by the time Herodotus visited them, and the biased Biblical accounts of Israel in bondage, have promoted the popular idea that Ancient Egypt was inhabited by an oppressed people toiling under privileged task-masters. The impression we get from the monuments is altogether different. It did happen sometimes that men were pushed too hard and had to obtain redress by appealing to higher authority or in

cf. Plate 61

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extreme cases by leaving the cultivation of their fields. We also have details of workers' strikes in Ramesside times when through mismanagement their pay fell into arrears. But these cases were exceptional. The ideal impressed by the sages in their teachings was that the official should act considerately towards the weak and defenceless man. 'If a poor cultivator is in arrears with his taxes, remit two-thirds of them', was the advice of one. That the basic wealth of Egypt was in its agriculture was well understood at all times when the magnates took pleasure in representing themselves absorbed in country life, in the work of gardens and vineyards as well as fields and stockyards. The picture may be idealized, but the rural life which they wished to perpetuate was regarded as the perfect one. We see the peasant busy in the fields at the seasons of sowing or reaping, though even then he has a chance to snooze during the midday break, or take a pull at a convenient wine-skin, and we realize that what was required of him was hard work in short bursts. During the inundation, when the country became a vast lake with the towns standing up above the waters on their mounds, there was a chance for relaxing, though the cattle then had to be fed by hand. There were also feast-days when it was not propitious to work: and always the peasant had the time and spirit to sing his work-songs as he drove his team round the threshing-floor, or carried the calf across the ford where the fishes and crocodile lurked. This rural life is attractively revealed as a busy one yet full of dignity and inward peace in *The Tale of the Two Brothers*, where the hero is a simple peasant lad who toils daily in his brother's fields. Sowing and reaping were duties that even the highest in the land expected to discharge in the fields of the Osirian other-world where the wheat stood nine cubits high, though the shawabu-figure would undertake the more onerous tasks of the *corvée*. In *The Satire on Trades* the scribe gives a highly coloured account of the farmer contending with drought, locusts, mice,

Plates 18, 52

Figs. 11, 12, 32

Plate 52

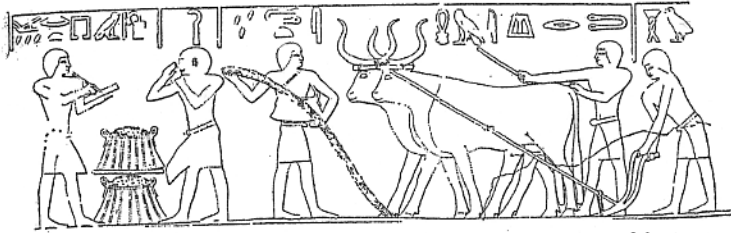


Fig. 50 The village headman receiving a supply of seed-corn from the clerk to the Keeper of the Storeroom, sowing the irrigated land, and turning in the seed with a shallow plough drawn by two cows; from a relief in a tomb near el-Bersba; c. 2330 B.C. Scale, 1 : 11

thieves, and the tax-collector: yet to the Greek, used to bitter toil on his own arid hills and stony pastures, Egypt seemed a lush land where crops grew with little effort. Each year the inundation deposited a rich silt over the old fields on which it was only necessary to scatter the grain and turn it in with a shallow plough drawn by a pair of cows. A main crop and a smaller summer crop could be harvested each year, the labour being largely concerned with the basin system of irrigation, raising dykes, cutting channels to let water flow from one level to another, and using the well-sweep or *shaduf* in summer to water the fields.

A less independent life would appear to have been led by the minor craftsmen and unskilled labourers in the towns. The ruins of their quarters have come to light at Thebes, Amarna, and Lahun where they lived in houses, usually of two or three rooms, within a walled enclosure. They were dependent for their rations upon the labour of others and if the commissariat failed or was venal they went hungry. Yet it would be wrong to draw conclusions from exceptional circumstances when the system broke down. Compared with the bathrooms, privies, loggias, bedrooms, halls, and store-rooms of the wealthy, their living-quarters may appear cramped but were no worse than the hovel of the peasant who often lived with his beasts. We

Plate 43

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Fig. 51 An annual distribution of clothing and oils to Syrian slave-women and their children attached to the temple of Amun at Karnak, after a painting in the tomb of the Vizier Rekmire, No. 100 at Thebes; c. 1440 B.C. Scale, 1 : 6

Plate 61

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shall, in fact, be extremely well equipped to get a picture of the life of the worker in Ancient Egypt more detailed and intimate than that of any other nation of Antiquity, or indeed of modern times, when Professor Černý of Oxford has completed his study of the great mass of records from Deir el-Medina. Here for nearly four centuries at Thebes lived generations of the workers employed mostly on tombs of the Pharaohs in the near-by Valley of the Kings—stone-masons, painters, draughtsmen, scribes, metal-workers, sculptors, artisans of all kinds

together with their labourers and auxiliaries. They were inveterate scribblers and from different sites at Thebes thousands of *ostraka* and some papyri have been recovered on which they jotted accounts, rosters, progress reports, work-sheets, provisions, testaments, sketches, and records of every kind. Already the life of this long-dead community is beginning to emerge as the material is sorted and studied. We know that the artisans were divided into shifts each under a foreman, that families intermarried, sons usually taking their father's posts except when influence had been used to get someone else appointed. Absenteeism was common, the excuses being many and various. Workmen did not report for duty when their wives were menstruating, probably because they then became ritually impure. We know the scale of rations provided and the extent of an average day's stint. An examination of the 'lamp account', and the daily issue of wicks, has cast light of a different sort on the length of the working day which will come as a surprise to those who think the life of the ancient worker was one of unremitting toil.

It may, however, be properly argued that the workmen of Deir el-Medina were skilled craftsmen some of them wealthy enough to have handsomely decorated tombs of their own. The lowest grade in the social scale was occupied by the serfs. Like all other nations of Antiquity, Egypt employed slave-labour. Captives taken in war were doubtless regarded as second-class citizens from earliest times, though the evidence does not begin to accumulate before the Middle Kingdom when, as we have seen, both Nubians and Asiatics took service in Egypt, either being sold into slavery, or exchanging a penurious and uncertain freedom for security and a modest subsistence. We have also seen how some such serfs were able to attain positions of trust and importance, and doubtless to secure their independence. Slavery on a greater scale existed during the New Kingdom when foreign wars and ethnic

Fig. 48
Plate 62

Plate 53



Fig. 52 A Syrian mercenary with his wife drinks beer through a reed, with an Egyptian servant in attendance; after a stela from Amarna, now in Berlin; c. 1355 B.C. Scale, 1:2

movements brought a lot of prisoners and refugees into the Nile Valley. We find captives assigned as serfs to the temples and private estates, and even to the household of Army officers. But the demarcation between slave and citizen was fluid. The personal slave of a high-ranking Egyptian would be far more affluent than most of the native peasantry. By Ramesside times foreigners held important posts in the Palace and the Army. A stela from earlier Amarna days shows a Syrian mercenary being waited upon by a native Egyptian. While slaves could be bought and sold or hired out, the Wilbour Papyrus makes it clear that they could also rent and cultivate land on the same

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conditions as an Army officer, priest, or other official. A simple declaration by the owner before witnesses was apparently sufficient to make a slave into a 'freedman of the land of Pharaoh', and one document has survived in which a woman adopted as her heirs the offspring of her dead husband and a female slave they had purchased, in preference to nearer relatives. Another case exists of a barber who married his orphan niece to a slave to whom he bequeathed his business.

The most wretched of Pharaoh's subjects were the criminals, some of them officials who had been found guilty of corruption; they were banished to the lonely frontier fortress of Tjel, or forced to labour in the mines of Sinai and Nubia, often after losing their noses.