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# DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

## READ ALOUD

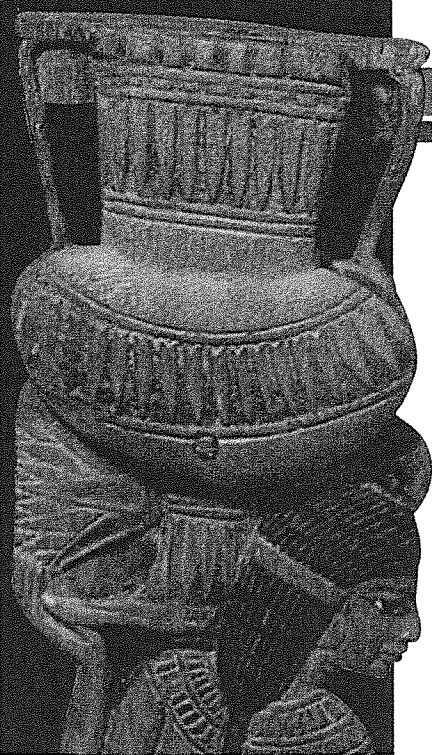
*Under the pharaohs of the New Kingdom, Egypt became the largest and most powerful empire in the world. As you have read, the empire spread eastward into western Asia. Egypt also conquered Nubia, to the south. You have also read how Egyptian goods and ideas spread far from the Nile Valley. How did this growing wealth and power affect the ordinary people who lived in the Egyptian empire?*

## THE BIG PICTURE

While Egypt's armies and traders traveled far and wide, Egyptians at home continued working to make their country strong. Farmers planted and harvested crops between the yearly Nile floods. Weavers made the linen cloth that kept Egyptians clothed. Woodworkers built the plows, benches, and chests that ordinary people used every day.

These hardworking members of Egyptian society rarely had their own farms or shops. Rather, most people worked on huge farms owned by government leaders, army officers, or scribes. Others lived in small houses tucked away in crowded city neighborhoods. There the craftworkers and farmers made simple goods in their homes. As they went about their daily lives, each of these Egyptians was contributing to the great success of the New Kingdom.

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## Focus Activity

### READ TO LEARN

How did people of the New Kingdom live and work?

### VOCABULARY

social pyramid  
slavery

## A SOCIAL PYRAMID

From the earliest days of Egypt's history, a person's position in society depended on what he or she did for a living. As a result the shape of Egyptian society was similar to that of a pyramid. The most powerful person, the pharaoh, was at the top of this social pyramid. Below the pharaoh ranked government officials, and below them, craftworkers. At the pyramid's base were farmers and captured people who made up the largest part of society.

Egyptians were not the only people who filled the empire's social pyramid. Nubian soldiers made up a large part of the pharaoh's army and police force. Syrian princes joined the ranks of Egypt's government officials. Syrian and Nubian craftworkers worked side by side with Egyptian craftworkers.

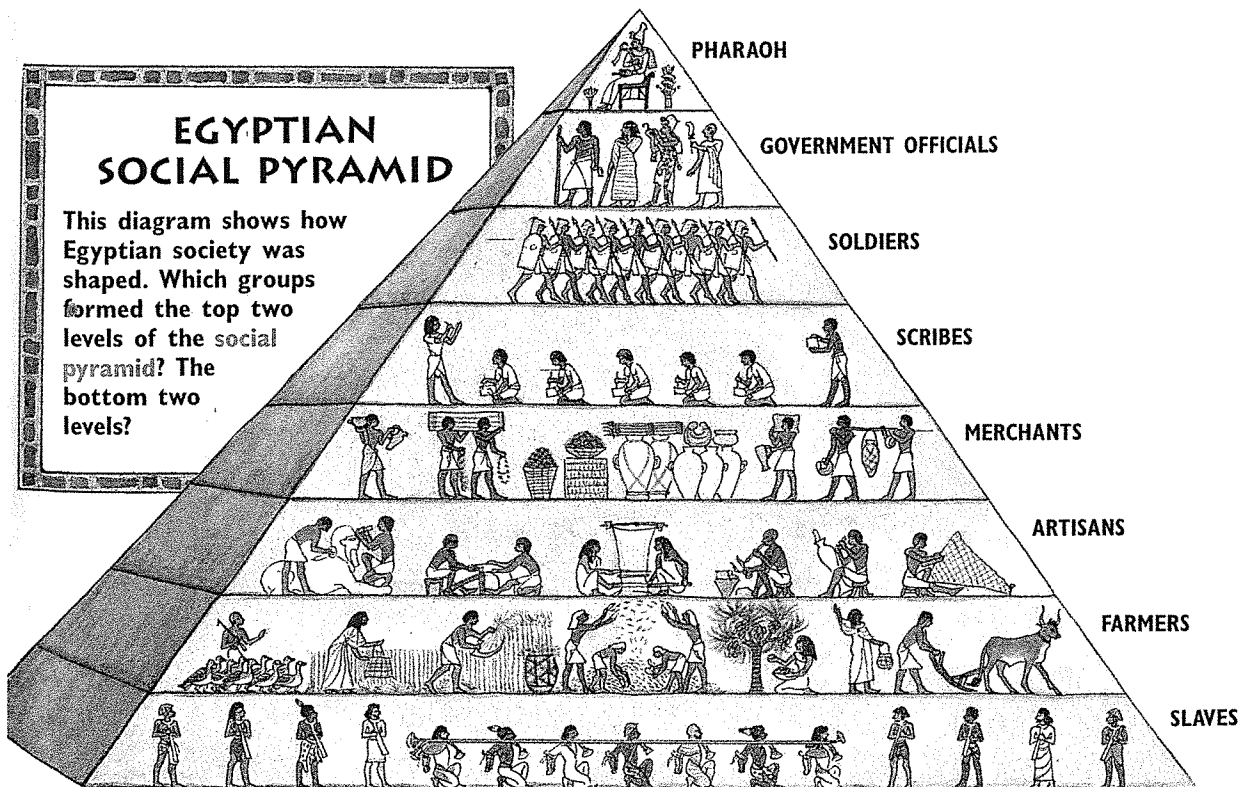
### Slavery in Egypt

The people at the lowest level of this social pyramid were those who lived

under slavery. Slavery is the practice of one person owning another person. When Egypt conquered Nubia and part of western Asia, Egyptians captured prisoners of war and enslaved them. Most of these people were Syrians, though many were Nubians.

Slaves did some of the hardest work that had to be done in Egypt. They worked in the heat of the desert to mine gold in Nubia. They worked alongside free farmers in the floodwaters of the Nile. They dug canals and prepared land for planting. Enslaved people also worked as house servants to wealthy Egyptians.

Egyptians bought enslaved Syrians and Nubians like they did cattle or cloth. One Syrian girl, for example, was sold for the price of four big sacks of grain and a piece of silver. However, enslaved people did have some basic rights in Egypt. They had the right to be treated fairly under the law and even to own property.



## FARMS AND CITIES

During the New Kingdom huge farms and busy cities dotted the shores of the Nile River. Life was very different in the two settings, but some things were similar. In both places ordinary people worked long hours for few rewards. Both in cities and on farms, people also enjoyed simple pleasures, such as celebrating holidays and playing games.

### Farm Life

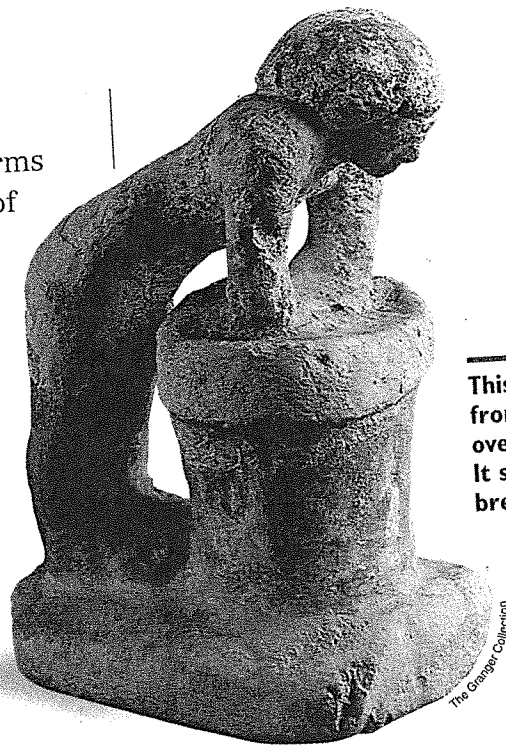
As you have read, most Egyptians lived on big farms owned by powerful people from the top of the social pyramid. These farms were run by loyal scribes. Farmers, craftworkers, and slaves did most of the work. Farms were like small worlds of their own. They produced most of the goods the people living there needed.

Farms bustled with many different kinds of activities. Farmers grew and harvested crops. Herders tended cattle and chickens. Bakers ground wheat from the fields and baked bread. Brewers made beer from wheat and barley, and fishers caught fish in the Nile. Brickmakers shaped bricks from river mud for workers' houses.

As many as half of these products went to the pharaoh as taxes. Most of what remained went to the owner of the farm. Workers and slaves divided the little that was left.

### Planting and Harvesting

None of the jobs were easy, but farming was perhaps the hardest of all. To prepare the soil for planting, farmers dug up large fields with cattle-drawn wooden plows and hoes. To



This figure was made from carved limestone over 4,000 years ago. It shows an Egyptian brewer at work.

bring water to the fields, farmers dug irrigation canals and hauled water using shadoufs. In addition farmers were often called upon by the government to help build canals, temples, or tombs for the pharaoh. It seemed like a farmer's work never ended!

At harvesttime women, men, and children headed out to the fields to cut, stack, and carry grain. As they worked in the blazing sun, a song leader chanted out songs and everyone sang along. Singing helped to make the time pass more quickly.

Farmers loaded the cut stalks into baskets and took them to threshing, or separating, areas. There, oxen or donkeys were walked over the stalks to separate the grain from the straw. Once again people sang songs, like this one, to make the hard work more fun:

*Strike [sort grain] for yourselves,  
Strike for yourselves, oxen!  
Straw to eat for yourselves  
and barley for your masters.  
Don't let your hearts grow weary!*

Once the grain was separated, girls tossed it into the air using wooden

shovels so the wind would blow the remaining straw away. Scribes measured and took away the shares claimed by the pharaoh and the farm owner. Despite the hard work harvest was a time for celebration. During this time special offerings were made to Ra and Rennunet, the gods of the harvest.

### Cities in Egypt

In Egypt's cities craftworkers and artists worked under similar conditions. Most lived in small, mud-brick homes crowded along narrow, winding streets. Archaeologists have uncovered the home of one family that lived in Memphis during Tutankhamun's rule. This house tells us much about life in Egypt's cities during the New Kingdom.

### A Busy Neighborhood

The house in which this family lived opened onto a busy, noisy alley. The entrance room served as a workshop where the parents made baskets or leather products. Behind the workshop were a small living room with a fireplace and two tiny rooms that may have been bedrooms. A stairway led up to the flat roof—a cool place to sleep on hot summer nights.

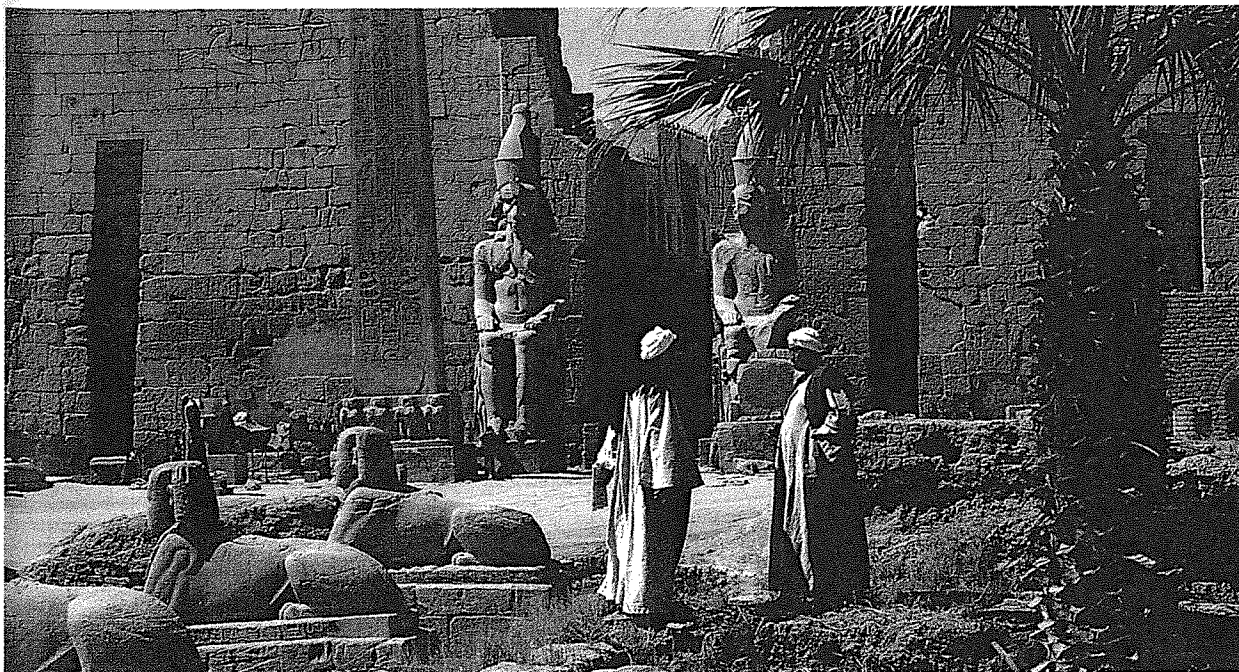
The family also had "everyday" chores to do. Every morning the women of the house went down to the local canal to get water. As the sun rose they chatted with friends who also were getting water. They returned home with clay water pots balanced on their heads. Women also had to bake bread. Bread was an important part of the ancient Egyptians' diet.

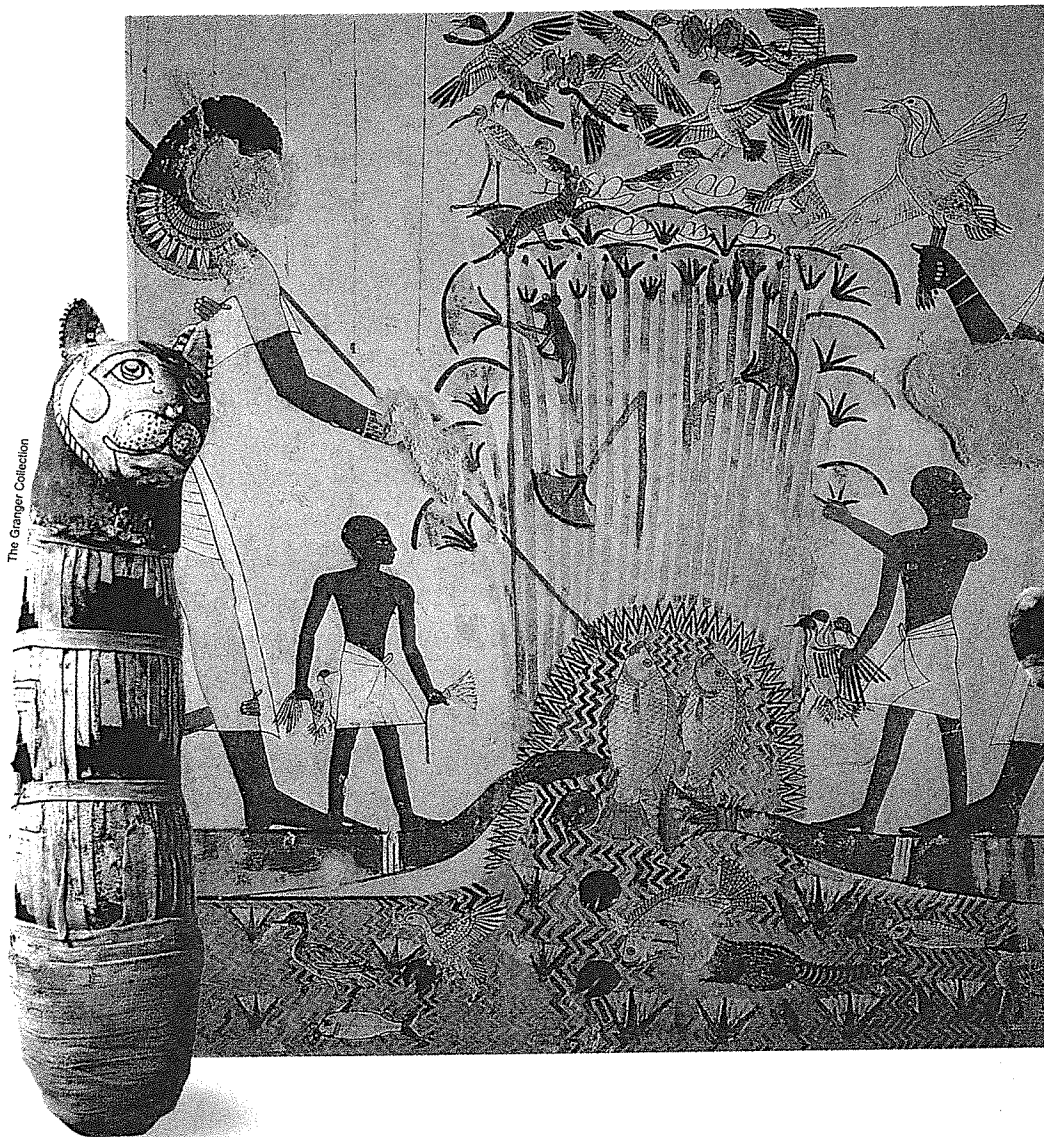
Each day the family probably went to market to sell their wares. At local markets the family could buy wheat, grapes, olives, fresh fish, beef, pork, and chicken. They may have bought linen cloth from the woman next door. Archaeologists think she made her living as a weaver. A toolmaker also lived nearby. Imagine the clang of his hammer above the sounds of the city.

Townsppeople worked hard at their jobs, but they liked to have fun too. Among the artifacts found in the house in Memphis were board games, for moments of free time.

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**These statues and walls are the remains of a temple in Luxor, Egypt. Note the size of the statues compared to the people standing nearby.**





Tomb paintings show many animals living along the Nile River. Tombs also contained mummies of pets, such as dogs and cats.

## CHILDREN IN EGYPT

Adults were not the only Egyptians who played games. Children rich and poor loved to spin tops, make cloth dolls, wrestle, run, and play games. Favorite pets included dogs, cats, and monkeys. Young boys and girls often played in the canals that flowed through the farms and villages. The children of pharaohs swam in their own swimming pools!

The amount of time children had to play depended on what their family did for work. Farmers' children had little time to play since they were often needed to help in the fields. Besides working at harvest time, farm children helped

scatter seeds during planting time. Farm children also did daily chores, such as carrying water or feeding the family's many farm animals.

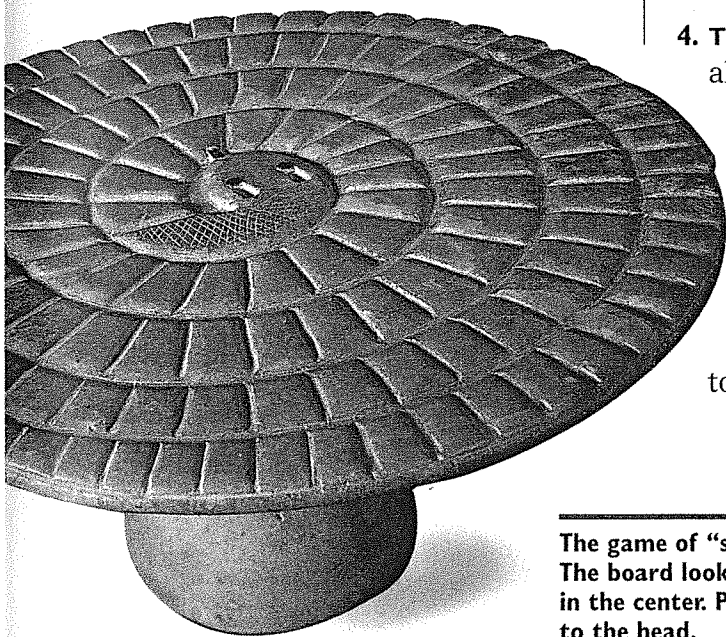
From about age five the children of craftworkers began working alongside their parents. In this way children learned the trade they would work at as adults. At an early age potters' children helped their parents put a smooth finish on their pots. At about age 12 girls studying to become weavers started training. This training could sometimes last up to five years.

Sons of government leaders became assistants to their fathers. They, too, would become leaders one day. Sons of scribes knew that from age ten they would be going to scribe school. That was a skill usually passed down from father to son as well.

## WHY IT MATTERS

The Egyptian empire went through great changes around the end of the New Kingdom. New armies from the west and northeast challenged the pharaoh's hold on the empire. The Egyptian army began to lose its firm control over the region. Finally, around 1100 B.C., united Egypt collapsed. The fall of the New Kingdom ended one of the richest civilizations in history.

Still, the "Gift of the Nile" would live on and affect people everywhere for centuries to come. Ancient Egypt's legacy extends even to our own time. Think about this legacy the next time you see a sailor harnessing the wind. You may think of another Egyptian legacy as you answer the Think About It questions on a sheet of paper!



The game of "snake" was an early board game. The board looked like a coiled snake with its head in the center. Players moved stones from the tail to the head.

## Reviewing Facts and Ideas

### SUM IT UP

- While Egypt became a mighty empire, ordinary people continued to work in much the same ways as they had for thousands of years.
- Enslaved Syrians and Nubians became key workers in Egypt's empire. They worked alongside farmers and craftworkers to produce needed crops and goods.
- Most farmers worked on large farms owned by powerful families.
- Most people in Egypt's towns and cities lived in crowded neighborhoods and crafted goods for a living.

### THINK ABOUT IT

1. How did Egypt's social pyramid shape life in the New Kingdom?
2. How did the growth of Egypt's empire play a role in the growth of slavery along the Nile? How did enslaved people add to the empire's economy?
3. **FOCUS** What was everyday life like for ancient Egyptians of the New Kingdom?
4. **THINKING SKILL** Make a conclusion about the variety of goods available in ancient Egyptian cities. What evidence can you find in the lesson to support your conclusion?
  5. **WRITE** Suppose you are a scribe in ancient Thebes. Write a letter to the owner of a large farm. Tell him or her what goods to send to your city.