

Social Classes and Gender Roles of Ancient Egypt

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Social Classes Before 1570 BCE

Before 1570 BCE the social structure of Egypt consisted of five basic classes. The three elite classes consisted of the royal family, priests and priestesses, and wealthy nobility. The fourth class consisted of scribes, officials, and artisans. The fifth class consisted of peasant farmers.

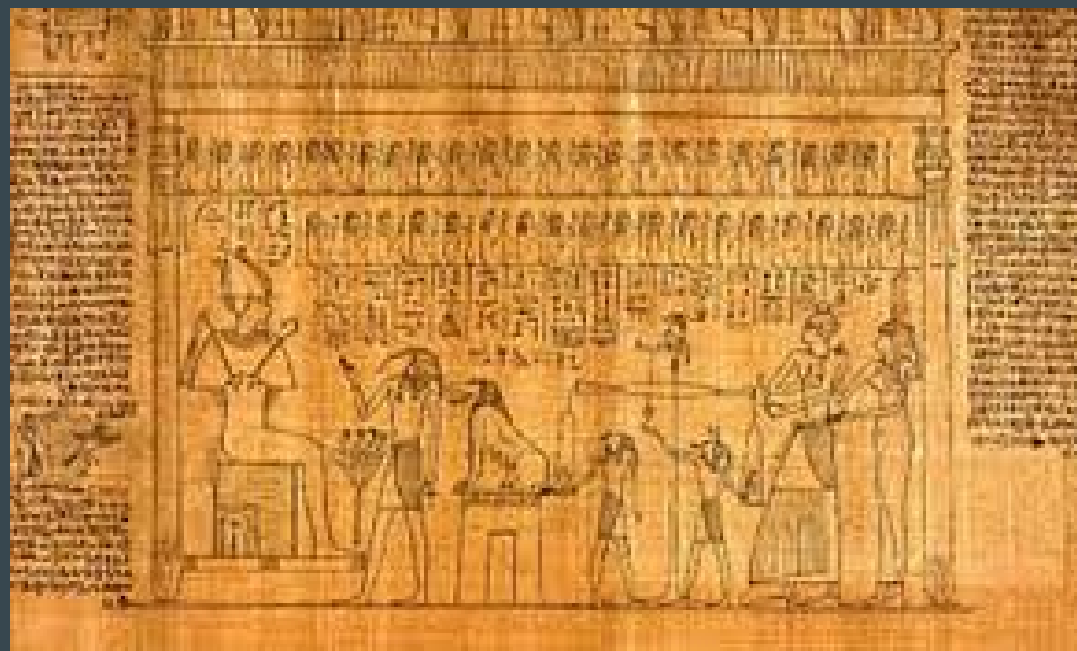


Farmer, Artisans, Scribe

Scribes

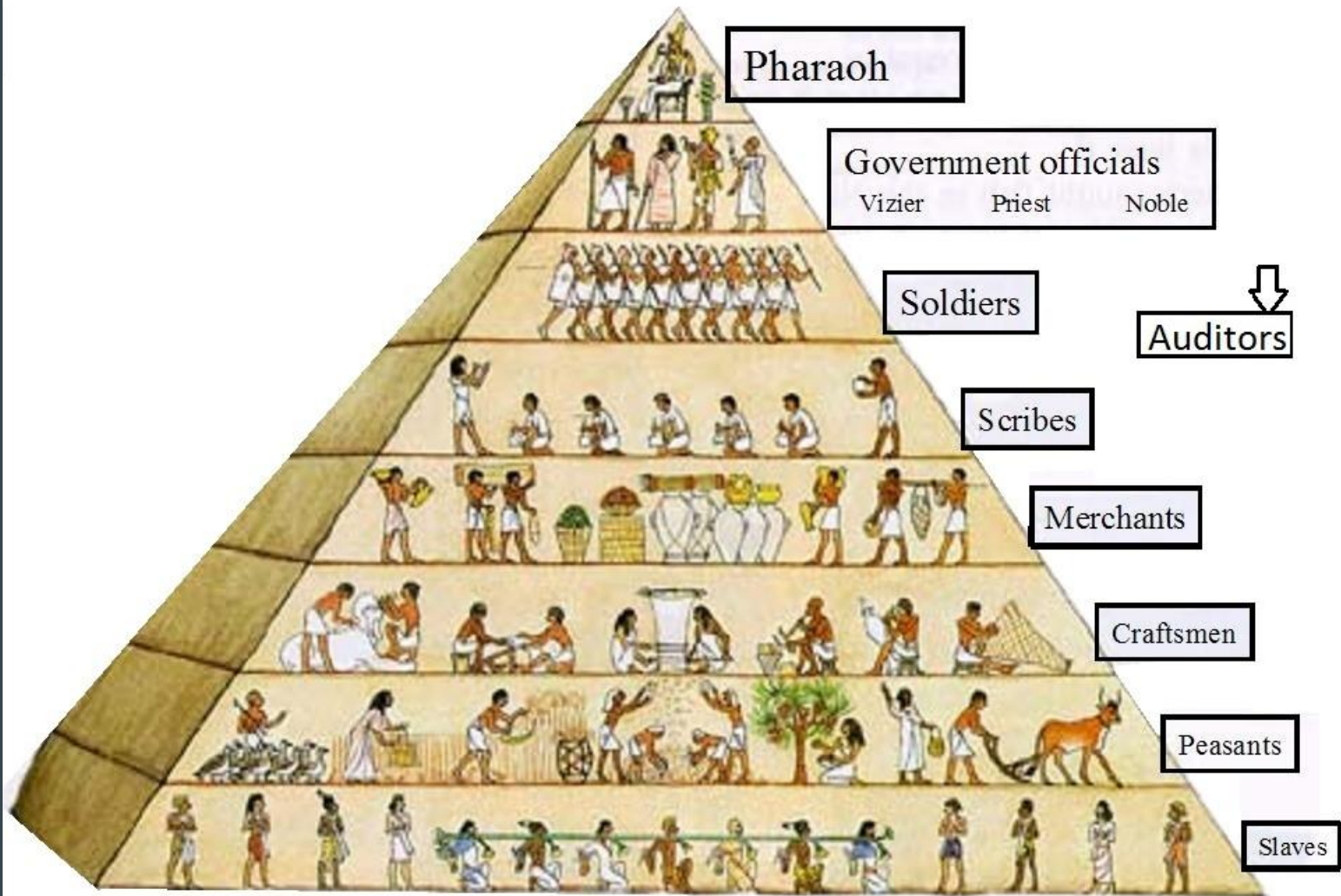
Not everyone learned to read and write in ancient Egypt. Only one group of people called scribes was allowed to have this knowledge. Scribes were people in ancient Egypt (usually men) who learned to read and write. Although experts believe that most scribes were men, there is evidence of some female doctors. These women would have been trained as scribes so that they could read medical texts. To become a scribe, you had to attend a special school for scribes. At this school you would learn how to read and write hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts.

This was hard work. These scripts are complicated, and there were many signs to learn. Students spent a lot of time practising the signs by copying them onto sheets of papyrus, old pieces of pottery or flakes of limestone. Most often it was the children of scribes who became scribes. Although some craftsmen were able to get their sons into the school for scribes, it was very rare. It could take four to five years for a person to go through scribe school. Scribes usually wrote on papyrus with reed brushes dipped in ink. The ancient Egyptians made ink by grinding brightly coloured minerals into powder, then mixing the powder with liquid so that it was easier to apply.



After 1570 BCE

Around 1570 B.C., two other classes were added: professional soldiers (near top), and slaves (very bottom). Although there was slavery, slaves never made up a major portion of the Egyptian population. This class system was rigid. People could improve their status through marriage or success at their jobs, but this was rare and difficult to do.



Social Structure

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.

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 grain, which were stored in the pharaoh's warehouses. This grain was used to feed the people in the event of a famine.

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.

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

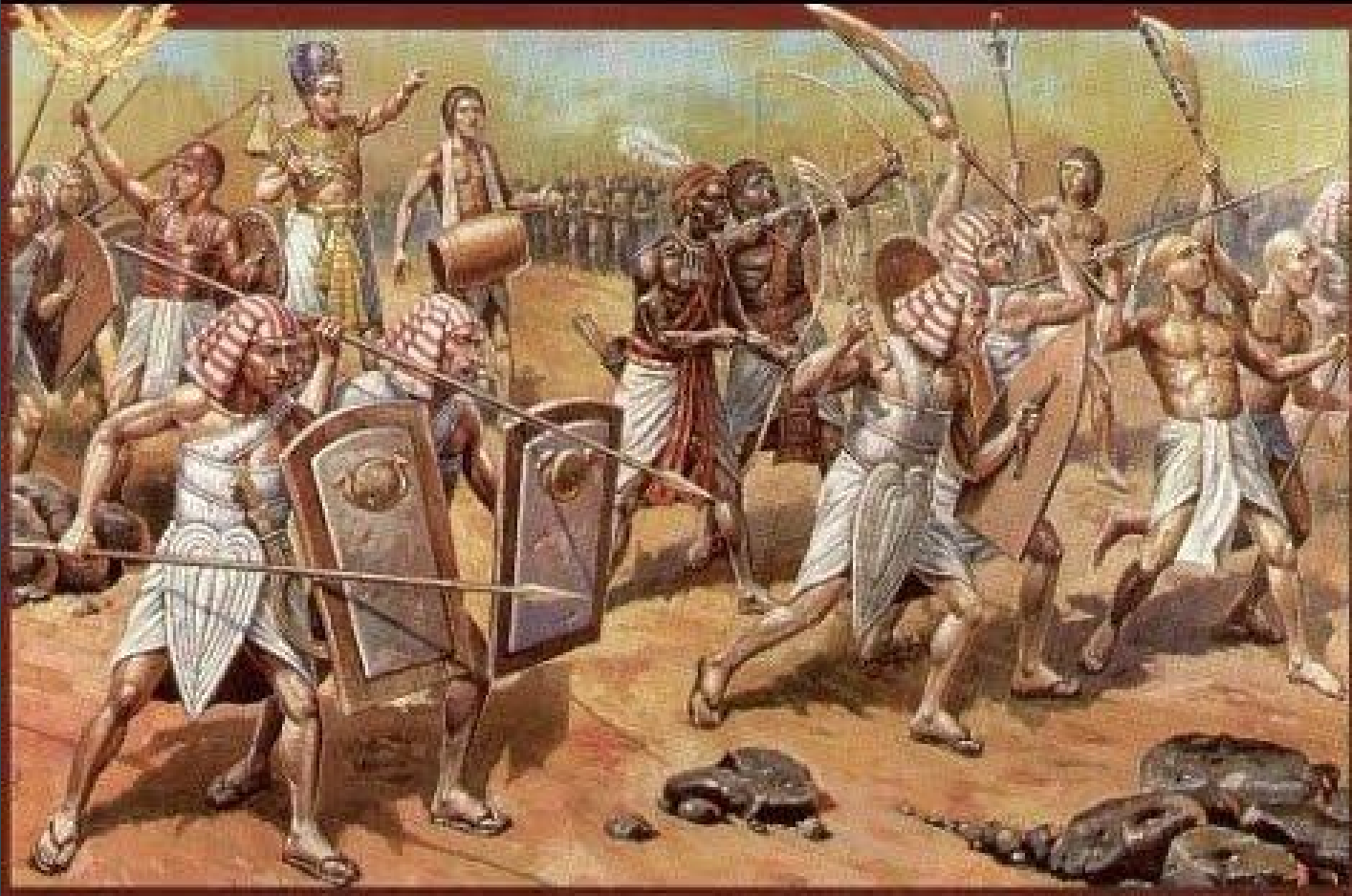
Right below the pharaoh in status were powerful nobles and priests. Only nobles could hold government posts; in these positions they profited from tributes paid to the pharaoh. Priests were responsible for pleasing the gods. Nobles enjoyed great status and also grew wealthy from donations to the gods. 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 craftspersons made up the middle class. Craftspersons 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.





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 be as much as 60 percent of their yearly harvest — that's a lot of hay!

Social Mobility

Social mobility 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. These schools were run by priests or by artisans. 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 proved lucrative.

Gender Roles: Equal Before the Law

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svq3gKjZsh0>

The gender roles of Egyptian men and women were mostly typical for the ancient world, but women did enjoy more rights than their Mesopotamian counterparts. Women could not hold a political office, but could take over her husband's duties while he was away. Women could hold property, and do as they wished with it. Property often passed through the female line in families. Women could divorce, and received one-third of the property and custody of the children. The common labor for women was cooking, baking, spinning, weaving, and managing the household—just like in Mesopotamia.

Beer brewing was also regarded as women's work—just like in Mesopotamia. Women could also be performers, nurses, hairdressers and housekeepers.

Men could hold political office, work on major building projects, farm, become an artisan, or become a scribe. Both men and women from the upper classes could attend school, but only boys went to scribe school, and therefore only men were scribes.

Compare and Contrast women's rights in Egypt to other civilizations we've talked about.

