

Social Classes

You are on a farmer's land, where ancient Egyptian officials are measuring the field to determine how much of the crop could be taxed. The grain is being harvested and processed by laborers and then inspected by an official.

Many social classes made up ancient Egyptian society, which was set up in the shape of a pyramid. The pharaoh was at the top of the social pyramid. Next came the members of the royal family, nobles, and government officials. Below them were the priests and priestesses. Then came the scribes, who were the Egyptian writers and record keepers. Below the scribes were the artists and skilled workers, such as carpenters, painters, and jewelers. At the bottom of the pyramid were the laborers. People born into one class could not easily move into another.

The pharaoh was the most powerful person in ancient Egyptian society. The pharaoh owned all the land and had complete control over the people. Still, the pharaoh needed the support of powerful nobles, military advisors, important priests, and other court officials to maintain his rule. To keep their support, the pharaoh often rewarded loyal nobles with gifts of land. Priests looked after the pharaoh's temples and held religious ceremonies. Other court officials, such as tax collectors and grain inspectors, helped the pharaoh govern.

Scribes also held a high position in ancient Egypt. An Egyptian had to attend scribal school to learn to read and write in order to become a scribe. Parents were eager to have their children attend these schools, because being a scribe was a way that a common person might become wealthy and powerful.

Artists, craftspeople, and other skilled workers were below the scribes. They created such objects as furniture, jewelry, and cloth for the pharaoh and other members of the royalty.

At the bottom of the social pyramid was the largest class, the laborers. Most ancient Egyptians were farmers, who spent much of their time raising and selling crops. However, during the flood season, from June to October, farming was not possible. During that time, laborers worked on government building projects, such as irrigation systems, pyramids, and temples.

Discussion Question: What were the different social classes in ancient Egyptian society?