9.2 Ancient Egypt’s Social Pyramid

Egyptian society was structured like a pyramid. At the very top of this social pyramid was the pharaoh, Egypt’s supreme ruler. Egyptian religion strengthened the pharaoh’s authority. Pharaohs were looked upon as gods, and their word was law.

Below the pharaoh were several layers of social classes. The classes near the top of the pyramid had the fewest people and enjoyed the highest status. The classes nearer the bottom had more people and lower status.

Egypt’s Social Classes

Government officials and priests belonged to the top two classes in the social pyramid under the pharaoh. They were the most powerful groups in Egypt.

Government officials carried out the orders of the pharaoh. Most of them came from noble families. They were powerful and wealthy, and they enjoyed a high quality of life.

Priests were also a powerful group, because religion touched every part of people’s daily lives. The priests were in charge of the temples and religious rituals. They also oversaw the important ceremonies surrounding death and burial.

Next on the social pyramid were scribes. The scribes held a respected position in society. They recorded information for government and religious leaders. It took many years of schooling to become a scribe.

Artisans occupied the next layer of the social pyramid. This group included craftspeople like carpenters, metal-workers, painters, sculptors, and stone carvers. Artisans were highly skilled, but they had little social status.
At the bottom of the social pyramid were the **peasants**. They were the largest social class. Peasants worked the land, providing Egypt with a steady food supply. When they weren’t farming, they worked on the pharaoh’s massive building projects.

**Life in Egypt’s Social Classes**

Egypt’s social pyramid was fairly rigid. People usually belonged to the same social class as their parents. Most people had little chance to move to a higher class. People in different classes had some things in common, but in other ways their lives were quite different.

Egyptians in all social classes cherished family life. Most Egyptians married within their social group. Children were highly valued.

Men and women had different roles within the family. Men were the heads of their households. They worked to support the family. Fathers often trained their sons from an early age to take on their line of work. Women typically managed the home and raised the children. Noblewomen had servants or slaves to help them. Lower-class women had to do the work themselves.

Men were in charge of Egyptian society, but women enjoyed more freedom and rights than most women in the ancient world. They could own land and run businesses. They could ask for divorces and represent themselves in legal matters. Some women in the middle and upper classes worked as doctors, government officials, or priestesses. Both women and men enjoyed a better quality of life the higher they were on the social pyramid.

The Egyptians believed that their class system created a stable, well-ordered society. Each group had its own role to play. Let’s take a look at the duties and daily lives of the various social classes during the time of the New Kingdom.