



Grand festivals brought together ancient Egyptians of every social class.

# Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

## 9.1 Introduction

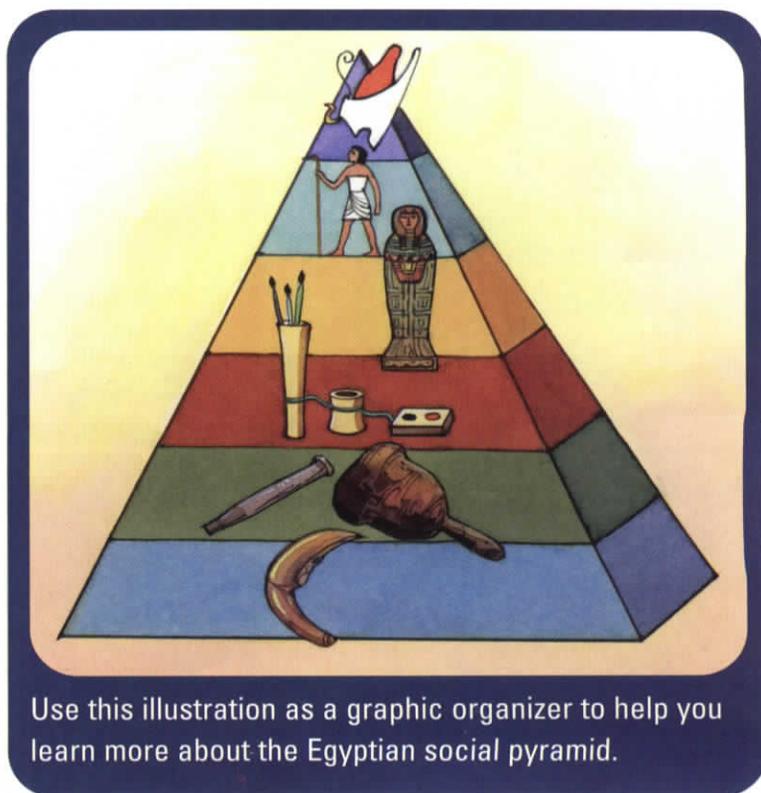
In Chapter 8, you learned about four Egyptian pharaohs. In this chapter, you will meet other members of Egyptian society. You'll learn what life was like for Egyptians during the New Kingdom (about 1600 to 1100 B.C.E.).

Each year, when the Nile River flooded its banks, all of Egypt celebrated the Opet Festival. Work in the fields stopped while the people joined in a festival honoring the pharaoh and his patron, the god Amon-Re.

Almost everyone in Egyptian society took part in the festival. Priests decorated a statue of the god with jewelry. They put the statue in a shrine and placed the shrine on a ceremonial boat called a *barque*. The beautifully decorated boat was made by artisans, or craftspeople. High government officials competed for the honor of carrying the barque on poles through town. Peasant farmers lined the streets to watch the procession. Scribes made a written record of the celebration.

The Opet Festival brought all these groups together. But in everyday life, they belonged to very different **social classes**. These classes made up a **social pyramid**, with the pharaoh at the top and peasants at the bottom. In between were government officials, priests, scribes, and artisans. The daily life of each class was quite different.

In this chapter, you will learn more about Egypt's social pyramid. Then you'll explore the work and daily life of the various classes in Egyptian society.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to help you learn more about the Egyptian social pyramid.

**artisan** a craftsperson  
**peasant** a person who does farmwork for wealthy landowners

## 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.

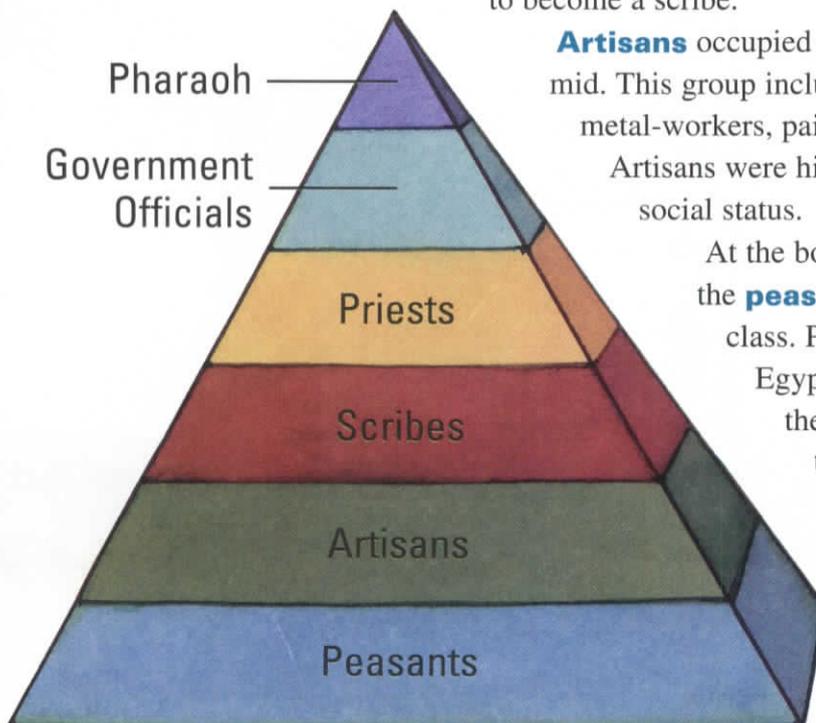
Priests were also a powerful group, because religion touched every part of people's daily lives. The priests were in charge of the temples and religious rituals. They also oversaw the important ceremonies surrounding death and burial.

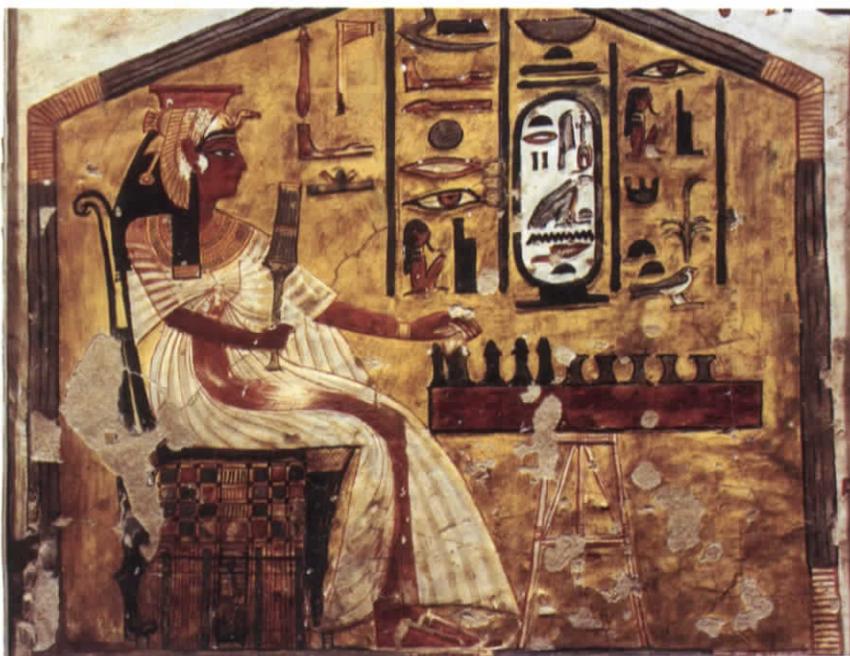
Next on the social pyramid were scribes. The scribes held a respected position in society. They recorded information for government and religious leaders. It took many years of schooling to become a scribe.

**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.

Ancient Egyptian society was organized like a pyramid. The groups near the top had the most power and status.





Egyptian women enjoyed more freedom and rights than most women in the ancient world. A few women even became pharaohs.

### 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.

**vizier** a high-ranking government official

**alliance** an agreement between nations to work together for common interests

## 9.3 Government Officials

Government officials belonged to the highest class on Egypt's social pyramid, after the pharaoh. Their job was to assist the pharaoh in his or her role as supreme ruler of Egypt.

Government officials usually came from the pharaoh's family or other upper-class families. Most of them inherited their positions from family members. However, trusted servants from the royal court sometimes rose to power.

### Important Government Officials

Three important officials were the vizier, the chief treasurer, and the general of the armies. Each had his own duties.

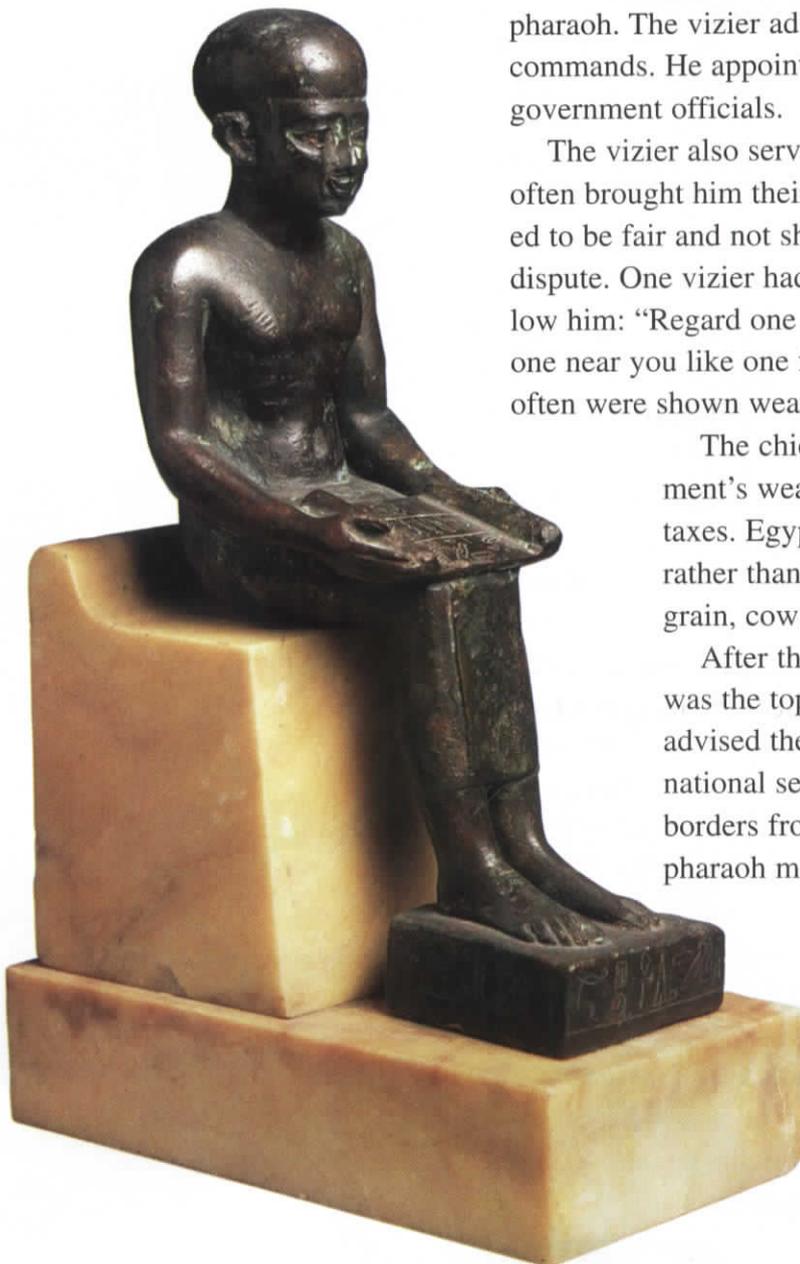
The **vizier** had more power than anyone except the pharaoh. The vizier advised the pharaoh and carried out his commands. He appointed and supervised most of the other government officials.

The vizier also served as a kind of chief judge. Judges often brought him their toughest cases. A vizier was expected to be fair and not show special favor to either side in a dispute. One vizier had this advice for those who would follow him: "Regard one you know like one you don't know, one near you like one far from you." In works of art, viziers often were shown wearing white, the color of neutrality.

The chief treasurer looked after the government's wealth. His main duty was to collect taxes. Egypt's economy was based on goods rather than money. People paid their taxes in grain, cows, cloth, silver, and even beer.

After the pharaoh, the general of the armies was the top military commander in Egypt. He advised the pharaoh in matters of war and national security, such as how to protect Egypt's borders from invaders. He also helped the pharaoh make **alliances** with other kingdoms.

This is a statue of Imhotep, an early and powerful vizier in ancient Egypt. Imhotep was famous for his role in designing and building great monuments.





### Lives of Luxury

High government officials led lives of luxury. Most were nobles who had great wealth, fine homes, and plenty of time to socialize.

The lavish banquets enjoyed by these wealthy Egyptians illustrate their luxurious lifestyle. A good host made every effort to provide the best food. Cooks roasted ducks, geese, pigeons, quail, antelope, wild sheep, and goats. Dishes were piled high with figs, dates, grapes, and coconuts. Bread, cakes, honey, and plenty of beer and wine completed the meal.

Guests at banquets dressed in fine linen clothing. Both men and women wore perfume. The women often wore ropes of beads. They painted their nails, lined their eyes with makeup, and wore lipstick.

At the start of a banquet, the guests usually offered the host long blessings. They wished the host many riches, great happiness, a long life, and good health. The host often simply responded with “Welcome, welcome,” or “Bread and beer,” as a way of saying, “Come and eat!”

The feast began with men and women sitting on opposite sides of the room. Important guests were given chairs with high backs. Everyone else sat on stools or cushions. Servants, who were nearly all women, waited on the guests. There were no forks or spoons, so people ate with their fingers.

While the guests ate, musicians, dancers, and acrobats provided entertainment. Most of the musicians were women. They played flutes, harps, rattles, and lutes (a guitarlike instrument). Guests often clapped along with the music.

This painting shows women at a banquet.



Priests shaved their heads as an act of cleanliness and to show their religious purity.

especially important role in Egyptian religion. Every temple was home to an Egyptian god or gods. A temple priest's main job was to take care of the god.

A temple's god was thought to live in a statue. The statue was housed in a holy room called a *sanctuary*. Only a priest who had purified (cleansed) himself could enter the sanctuary. There were many things a priest had to do in order to be purified. He had to avoid certain foods, such as fish, that were associated with the lower classes. He had to cleanse his body by bathing three or four times a day in holy pools. He also had to shave off his body hair. And he had to wear clothes made of linen cloth, because animal products like leather and wool were considered unclean. Once he was purified, the priest could perform his sacred duties.

## 9.4 Priests

Like government officials, priests were powerful and highly respected in Egyptian society. A large network of priests served under the pharaoh, who was considered the highest-ranked priest of all.

### The Duties of Priests

Priests had different jobs. The High Priest advised the pharaoh and oversaw all religious ceremonies. Temple priests were in charge of the many temples scattered throughout Egypt. Other priests handled more common concerns and requests. They gave advice and performed healings.

Women were allowed to be priestesses in Egypt. They were generally considered to be equal to male priests. Their main duty was to oversee temples that were devoted to music and dancing.

Temple priests played an

## The Priests' Role in Burial Practices

Priests had a special role to play in burial practices. Egyptians believed in a life after death. They thought the spirits of the dead needed their bodies in the afterlife. For this reason, they preserved bodies from decay through **embalming**. Priests oversaw this sacred work.

The embalming process had many steps. First, the embalmers removed the body's organs, such as the brain, lungs, and liver. They used hooks to pull the brain out through the nostrils. Only the heart was left in the body. Egyptians believed that the gods used the heart to judge a dead person's soul.

The organs were packed in jars to preserve them. The organs and body were dried out with a special salt called *natron*.

After about 70 days, the embalmers washed and oiled the body. Then they wrapped it in hundreds of yards of linen. They decorated the wrapped body, or mummy, with jewelry and protective charms. Often they placed a mask over the head. Finally, they spread a black, gooey gum over the body and wrapped it a final time.

The mummy was then ready for burial. The mummy was placed in a wooden box which was then put inside a large stone coffin, called a **sarcophagus**. Because the ancient Egyptians believed that the afterlife was much like life in this world, the box or coffin was buried along with other items. These included food and drink, furniture, statues, gold, jewelry, clothes, games, and mirrors.

Not all Egyptians could afford such complicated burials. But even poor Egyptians wrapped their dead in cloth and buried them with jars of beer, loaves of bread, and other items they thought would be needed in the afterlife.



The process of embalming a body produced a mummy, such as those shown here.

**embalm** to treat a dead body with preservatives to prevent it from decaying

**sarcophagus** a large stone coffin

**hieroglyph** a symbol used in hieroglyphics, a system of writing developed in about 3000 B.C.E.

## 9.5 Scribes

Scribes were one level below priests in the social pyramid. Scribes were Egypt's official writers and record keepers. They were highly respected and well paid. Most scribes worked for the government. Others worked for priests or nobles.

Only men were allowed to be scribes. They came from all classes of society. Becoming a scribe was one of the few ways that men could rise above their parents' social class.

### Scribe Schools

Boys who wanted to become scribes had to attend scribe school. The schools were run by priests. Most students came from artisan or merchant families. A very few came from the peasant class.

Schooling started around the age of five. Students typically spent 12 years or more learning **hieroglyphs**, the symbols used in the Egyptian system of writing. The system was very complicated. Most students first mastered a simpler form of writing and then worked their way up to hieroglyphs.

Students had to memorize over 700 hieroglyphs. They spent as many as four years copying the signs over and over. They practiced their writing on pieces of wood, flakes

of stone, and even broken bits of pottery. When they were good enough, they were allowed to write on papyrus, a type of paper made from the papyrus plant.

Students in scribe schools did not have an easy life. Classes sometimes lasted from dawn until sunset. Teachers were strict and often treated their students harshly. They frequently yelled at students for being lazy or not paying attention. Beatings were common. One stern schoolmaster wrote, "A youngster's ear is on his back; he only listens to the man who beats him."



This engraving shows students in a scribe school working at their writing.

## The Work of the Scribes

Ancient Egyptians made all kinds of records, so scribes held a wide variety of jobs. They kept records of the grain and food supply. When a government **census** counted the people living in Egypt, they recorded the results. Some scribes calculated and collected taxes. Legal scribes recorded court cases and helped enforce laws. Military scribes kept track of the army's soldiers and food supply, and the number of enemies killed in battle.

Every scribe used the same tools. For pens, a scribe used finely sharpened reeds. For paper, he used a sheet of papyrus laid out on a writing tablet. The tablets were made of wood or stone. Each tablet contained two wells, one for black ink and one for red ink. A small container held water that was used to wet the ink.

A scribe carried his tools with him wherever he traveled. His tablet hung from a cord slung over his shoulder. Leather bags and cases attached to the tablet held his other tools.

Scribes also carried rolls of papyrus. This paper was a remarkable invention of the Egyptians. To make it, they first cut the inner part of the papyrus plant into strips and soaked the strips in water for several days until they were soft. Then they laid the strips out in a crisscross pattern between two sheets of cloth. The papyrus strips were pressed together until the cloth had absorbed all the water. Finally, the papyrus strips were pressed one more time to form a sheet of paper.

**census** an official count of the population or number of people living in an area

This relief shows two scribes. Only men were allowed to be scribes, although women were sometimes taught to read and write.





## 9.6 Artisans

Below the scribes on the social pyramid were the artisans. Egypt's artisans were highly skilled laborers who created some of the most beautiful art objects in the ancient world. Yet, unlike scribes, they rarely got the respect they deserved. Only the select few who became master craftsmen were sometimes honored for their work.

### Types of Artisans

Artisans specialized in any one of a number of crafts. Workers in this class included carpenters, jewelers, leatherworkers, metalworkers, painters, potters, sculptors, and weavers. Artisans made many beautiful objects, including stunning jewelry and elegant furniture. Painters portrayed scenes of Egyptian daily life. Most artisans were men, but some women wove fabric, beaded clothing, and made perfume.

Stone carvers were some of the most skilled workers in the artisan class.

The most skilled artisans were the stone carvers. They produced the statues, engravings, and reliefs found in Egyptian temples, tombs, and monuments.

Stone carvers played an important role in tomb building. The belief in an afterlife inspired wealthy Egyptians to order elaborate tombs for themselves. Stone carvers helped equip the tombs with artwork to honor and preserve the dead. They created statues of the deceased, highly detailed wall engravings, and stone coffins.

Stone carving was hard, time-consuming work. The carvers often worked with very hard rock, such as granite. They used a hard type of rock called *dolerite* to pound out the object's initial shape. Next, they refined the shape and carved in details using stone tools and copper chisels. Then they smoothed and polished the object using quartz sand. Painters often added color to the finished product.



This painting shows different kinds of artisans at work. Look carefully. What do you see?

## The Daily Life and Work of Artisans

Artisans were a class in the middle of Egyptian society. They and their families lived in modest homes. Their houses were usually rectangular and barely 10 yards long. Three rooms stretched from front to back. The first room was used either as a workroom or to house animals. The living room came next. The final room was divided into a kitchen and a bedroom. The roof was sometimes used as a place to work or sleep.

Artisans typically worked side by side in large workshops. They usually worked for 10 days at a stretch before taking time off. The workers depended entirely on their employers for food. In hard times when food was in short supply, artisans often went hungry.

Pharaohs called upon hundreds of artisans at a time to work on royal projects. Artisans created the fine artwork that often covered temples, royal tombs, and other monuments. They worked in large groups to complete engravings, paintings, and hieroglyphics.

Despite artisans' skill and creativity, the upper classes often viewed them as little more than common laborers. Even the most talented artists were almost never allowed to sign their work. But some artists did receive recognition. Employers sometimes threw a banquet for their favorite artist. Occasionally they honored an artist by letting him portray himself in a painting or an engraving.



This painting shows two peasant farmers sowing their land. Peasants worked hard to supply Egyptians with food.

## 9.7 Peasants

Peasants made up the lowest and largest class in Egypt's social pyramid. They were generally considered unskilled laborers. Yet Egyptian society depended on their work. Peasants grew the crops that supplied everyone with food. When they weren't busy working the fields, they helped build monuments like the pyramids.

### The Three Seasons of the Nile

Peasant life revolved around the Nile River and its three seasons: the flooding season, the

planting season, and the harvest season.

The flooding season lasted from June to September. During this time, the Nile overran its banks and fertilized the fields. Farmers had to wait for the waters to go down before they could work the fields. In the meantime, they labored on royal projects, such as building pyramids and temples.

In October, the planting season began and farmers sowed their fields with seeds. The biggest crops were wheat and barley, which were used to make bread and beer.

Peasants worked in pairs to sow the fields. The farmer softened the earth with a plow pulled by cattle. A second person, often the farmer's wife, followed behind to scatter the seeds. Throughout the season, farmers carefully irrigated the land.

The harvest season began in March. Usually the farmer's entire family helped with the harvest. The men cut down the plants with sickles (metal blades with short wooden handles). Then the women and children gathered the tall stalks of grain.

During harvesttime, everyone worked from dawn to dusk. Peasants often sang songs to make the long hours of labor go more quickly. Sometimes musicians played in the fields while the workers sang.

## The Daily Lives of Peasants

Peasants had the fewest comforts of any of the social classes. They lived in simple houses made of mud bricks. Their furniture was usually limited to woven mats.

The peasants' diet was simple. A typical meal might include onions, cucumbers, fish, homemade bread, and water or beer. Peas and lentils were also common. Unlike the upper classes, peasants rarely ate meat. In times of **famine**, they often had to boil tough papyrus plants for food.

Peasants spent most of their lives working, but they did have some time for fun. Men enjoyed a river game that involved knocking each other off papyrus rafts. Holidays were celebrated before planting and after the harvest. Peasants also took part in festivals honoring the Egyptian gods.

An important time of year for peasants was the end of the harvest season. As a reward for their hard work, they were allowed to gather up as much leftover grain as they could and keep it for food. But they could also be punished for a poor harvest.

Farmers had to pay taxes in the form of crops. If a farmer's harvest came up short and he couldn't pay the required tax, he was brutally beaten.

**famine** a severe shortage of food

This painting shows peasants cutting and gathering the wheat harvest.



## 9.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about Egypt's social pyramid. Each social class had its own role to play in society. You learned about the work and daily lives of government officials, priests, scribes, artisans, and peasants. In the next chapter, you will travel south along the Nile and explore the civilization of Kush.