NO PREP

Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

Beyond the Pharaohs

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Daily Life in Ancient Egypt: Beyond the Pharaohs

The Egypt Behind the Monuments

When most people imagine ancient Egypt, they picture pharaohs, pyramids, and golden treasure. What they rarely picture is a woman in a linen dress haggling over fish prices at a riverside market, or a group of teenage boys playing a game resembling field hockey in a dusty courtyard, or a frustrated father writing a stiff letter to a government official complaining about his son's delinquent coworkers. Yet all of these things happened in ancient Egypt — we know because archaeological evidence and written records tell us so. The Egypt of ordinary people was, in many ways, as rich and interesting as the Egypt of the pharaohs, and in some

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Deir el-Medina: The Workers Who Built the Royal Tombs

The most detailed picture of ordinary Egyptian life comes from an extraordinary archaeological site called Deir el-Medina, a workers' village near Luxor where the craftsmen who built and decorated the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings lived with their families from around 1550 to 1080 BCE. Because the villagers were literate (scribal skills were necessary for the tomb inscriptions), they left behind an astonishing archive of written records on broken pottery shards called ostraca. These records reveal a community that feels startlingly modern. The workers of

Deir el-Medina went on strike around 1157 BCE, one of the first recorded labor strikes in history, when the government failed to deliver their rations of grain, fish, and vegetables for several weeks. They marched to nearby temples and sat in protest, refusing to return to work until they were fed. Records show that wages were paid in kind: a skilled worker received a monthly ration of approximately 5.5 sacks of emmer wheat and 2 sacks of barley, plus regular deliveries of fish, vegetables, and sometimes firewood and salt. One ostracon contains a woman's formal complaint that her husband's colleague had stolen her blouse. Another records a man suing his neighbor over an unpaid debt of three copper deben. The concerns were familiar: work, wages, theft, and neighbors who owed you money.

Food, Clothing, and Housing

The Egyptian diet was built around bread and beer, both made from grain and both consumed daily at every social level. Bread came in dozens of varieties; archaeologists have identified at least forty different types from bread molds and carbonized loaves. Beer was thick and nutritious, more like a liquid bread than the clear beverages we associate with the word today, and it served as a caloric staple as well as a social lubricant. Wealthier Egyptians added meat (beef, pork, duck, and goose), fish, vegetables (onions, leeks, lettuce, beans), fruit (dates, figs, pomegranates), and honey to their diets. Most Egyptians wore linen, a fabric woven from flax, which grew abundantly in the Nile Valley. Linen was lighter and cooler than wool in Egypt's climate and could be bleached pure white or dyed in muted colors. The elite wore fine pleated linen of extraordinary quality; ordinary Egyptians wore coarser cloth in simple styles. Both men and women wore makeup: kohl (black eye paint) was applied by everyone, as it was believed to protect the eyes from the sun's glare as well as from evil. Housing ranged from the mudbrick one- and two-room homes of laborers to the multi-room villas of wealthy officials, most built around an internal courtyard that provided shade and ventilation.

Family Life and the Status of Women

Egyptian families typically lived in nuclear units — parents and children — with extended family living nearby. The average life expectancy was short by modern standards: perhaps 35-40 years for men and somewhat less for women, given the dangers of childbirth. Infant mortality was high, and many children did not survive to adulthood. Families compensated by placing amulets on babies, reciting protective

spells, and praying to the household goddess Taweret (a hippopotamus goddess who protected pregnant women and newborns) and the dwarf god Bes. Egyptian women had a remarkably high legal status compared to women in most other ancient societies. They could own property, enter legal contracts, initiate divorce, conduct business, and testify in court. A legal document from Deir el-Medina shows a woman buying property with her own earnings while her husband was away at work. Women could also hold certain priestly positions, and widows or divorced women managed their own finances independently. However, most women worked within the household — weaving, managing food production, raising children — while professional and governmental roles were dominated by men.

Play, Music, and Entertainment

Ancient Egyptians were not all work and reverence. They played board games — the game of Senet, a racing game played on a grid of thirty squares, was so popular it was believed to be played in the afterlife as well as by the living. Paintings show Egyptians playing instruments including harps, lutes, flutes, and clappers. They held athletic competitions including wrestling, stick-fighting, and target shooting. Festivals honoring gods were major community events involving processions, food, music, and general revelry that could last for days. The literary tradition reveals a population with a sense of humor and a taste for storytelling. Egyptian love poetry, preserved on papyri from the New Kingdom, reads with surprising warmth and wit: 'My heart is not yet done with your lovemaking. The pupil is a little jackal in your net. Your hair is a snare of sycamore.' School exercise tablets show students copying proverbs and moral instruction, but also occasionally doodling in the margins — animals drawn in the corners of practice texts, suggesting bored students who looked remarkably like bored students today.

Key Information: Daily Life in Ancient Egypt

Detail	Information
Main Food Staples	Bread and beer, both made from grain
Clothing Material	Linen, woven from Nile flax; worn by all social classes
Deir el-Medina	Workers' village near Luxor; occupied c. 1550–1080 BCE

Detail	Information
First Recorded Strike	Deir el-Medina workers, c. 1157 BCE over unpaid food rations
Worker Payment	Monthly rations of grain, fish, vegetables, firewood, and salt
Women's Legal Rights	Could own property, make contracts, divorce, testify in court
Eye Makeup (Kohl)	Worn by men and women; protection from sun and evil
Popular Board Game	Senet — a racing game on a 30-square grid
Life Expectancy	Approximately 35–40 years; infant mortality was high
Written Records Source	Ostraca — pottery shards used as informal writing surfaces

Case Study: Merit's Letter

Merit was thirty-one years old and had been writing letters her whole life — to her husband Kha when he was working on the tomb crews, to her sister in the next village, and once, memorably, to the official in charge of rations distribution when her family's grain allocation was shorted by half a sack for three consecutive months. Today's letter was different. It was addressed to the village magistrate, and it concerned the man next door — a stonecutter named Amenemhab — who had, she believed, stolen the wooden box her husband used to store his good chisel. Her husband had not reported it because Amenemhab was his work partner and he didn't want trouble on the crew. Merit had different priorities. She wrote: 'I, Merit, wife of Kha the stonecutter, address this complaint to the magistrate concerning the disappearance of one wooden tool chest belonging to my husband. The chest was last seen three days ago. Amenemhab was present. I am prepared to swear before Amun and before the magistrate that I saw the chest in our yard on the morning in question. I ask that justice be done according to Ma'at.' She sealed the letter with clay and gave it to her son to deliver. Her husband would be angry when he found out. She was willing to accept that. The chisel had been a gift from his father.

1. Merit's letter demonstrates the legal rights of women described in the reading. List at least two specific rights or capabilities that Merit is exercising in this situation, and explain how they connect to what the reading says about Egyptian women's legal status.

2. Merit invokes both the god Amun and the principle of Ma'at in her letter to the magistrate. Based on the reading's explanation of how religion permeated Egyptian daily life, why might these invocations have been legally and socially significant rather than purely religious?

Multiple Choice

1. What was the significance of the Deir el-Medina strike of about 1157 BCE?

    a) It resulted in the establishment of Egypt's first written legal code for workers

    b) It led directly to the collapse of the New Kingdom and the Third Intermediate Period

    c) It is one of the first recorded labor strikes in history, triggered by unpaid food rations

    d) It was the first time Egyptian workers demanded the right to vote on all government decisions

2. What were ostraca, and why are they historically valuable?

    a) Pottery shards used as informal writing surfaces that preserved records of ordinary life

    b) Wooden panels painted with scenes of daily life, found in noble tombs

    c) Limestone blocks carved with tax records and stored in government warehouses

    d) Bronze tablets inscribed with royal decrees and distributed to Egypt's provincial governors

3. What legal rights did ancient Egyptian women possess that were unusual compared to other ancient societies?

a) The right to hold any scribal or priestly position in Egyptian religious institutions

b) The right to serve as pharaoh with full divine status equal to male rulers

c) The right to serve in the military in any role they chose, including combat positions

d) The right to own property, make contracts, initiate divorce, and testify in court

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Deir el-Medina	A) A popular ancient Egyptian board game played on a 30-square grid, believed to be played in the afterlife
2. ___ Ostraca	B) The chief minister of ancient Egypt, second in authority only to the pharaoh
3. ___ Kohl	C) The workers' village near Luxor where the craftsmen who built the royal tombs lived for nearly 500 years
4. ___ Senet	D) Black eye paint worn by both men and women in ancient Egypt for sun protection and ritual purposes
5. ___ Vizier	E) Broken pottery shards used as informal writing surfaces for letters, complaints, and records

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Workers at Deir el-Medina were paid in _____ rather than money, receiving monthly allocations of grain, fish, and vegetables.

2. The first recorded labor _____ in history occurred in Egypt around 1157 BCE when Deir el-Medina workers protested unpaid food rations.

3. The household goddess _____, depicted as a hippopotamus, protected pregnant women and newborns in ancient Egypt.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading describes the ostraca from Deir el-Medina as records that feel 'startlingly modern.' What specific examples from the reading support this description? Why might everyday concerns transcend historical time periods?

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2. Egyptian women had significantly more legal rights than women in many other ancient societies. What might explain why Egyptian society developed these rights, and what limitations on women's roles still existed despite these legal protections?

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3. The reading mentions Egyptian love poetry, board games, and athletic competitions as evidence of a full cultural life beyond religious practices. Why is it important for historians to study entertainment and leisure activities alongside official records and monuments?

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