Part 1

Ancient societies


FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What role did the pharaoh play in Ramesside society?

2. How was society structured and what were the functions of individuals and social groups?

3. What factors contributed to economic prosperity and decline?

4. What were the characteristic features of work and leisure for Egyptians of all classes?

5. What place did religious and funerary beliefs and practices have in the lives of New Kingdom Egyptians?

6. What were the most important developments in art, architecture and literature?

INTRODUCTION

The Ramesside period in New Kingdom Egypt is named for a succession of pharaohs called Ramesses who reigned during the 19th and 20th Dynasties. The period opens in 1293 BC with the accession of Ramesses I, who succeeded Horemheb, the last king of Dynasty 18, and closes with the reign of Ramesses XI in 1070 BC.

In many ways, the early rulers of the 19th Dynasty looked back to the great days of the 18th Dynasty when the Egyptian empire was at its height and the country enjoyed enormous prosperity. The Ramesside kings of the early 19th Dynasty re-established some of Egypt’s influence in Syria and Palestine, but it was the Egypto-Hittite peace treaty of Ramesses II’s reign that most clearly signalled the days of militant empire building were finally over.

Ramesside Egypt was administered for the most part as a well-oiled bureaucracy, led by the pharaoh in whom all power was concentrated. A host of officials comprising the upper and lower ranks of the nobility, headed by the viziers, carried out the business of government in a centralised state. For the mass of the population, life was dominated by the agricultural cycle, the backbone of the Egyptian economy.

Religion played a central role in the society of the time. The state religion, the cult of the great Amun-Re, provided the drive for many of the activities and achievements of Ramesside Egypt. The impact of the Amarna revolution played an important role in shaping the policies of the Ramesside pharaohs. As always, the common people followed their own personal gods but participated in the important religious pageants and festivals of their time.

Egypt’s imperial age had brought it into closer contact with neighbouring powers. Booty plundered from conquered territories and tribute collected from vassal kingdoms, along with peaceful trade, increased Egypt’s wealth. The empire provided raw materials destined for the royal workshops and subsequently the tombs and temples of the land.

The Ramesside period has left an indelible mark on the landscape of Egypt. Its pharaohs embarked on an ambitious state building program designed to adver-
tise their achievements and ensure their immortality. The kings of this period came from the Delta where they built a city of palaces and temples. However, they maintained the long tradition of adding to the glory of Amun’s city of Thebes—they also continued to be buried in the Valley of the Kings. Today their monuments stand as a testament to their vision. Ramesside art and architecture may lack the grace of an earlier period, but no other can compete with its bombastic grandeur.

Egypt maintained a disciplined and highly skilled standing army and a military career provided a chief avenue for advancement in Ramesside society. Most frequently, the army of conquest was led in person by the pharaoh, whose portrayal as a mighty conquering hero remained one of the dominant themes of the New Kingdom period.

Dynastic struggle and civil strife plagued the pharaohs of the 20th Dynasty and there was a series of external threats from Libya and the ‘Sea Peoples’, which culminated in the great battles of Ramesses III. Thereafter, a steady decline in the power of the pharaoh and in building activity set in. Egypt’s possessions in both Nubia and Palestine fell away and the breakdown in the central administration was reflected in the economy and society of the time.

When a high priest of Amun named Herihor took the throne at the end of the 20th Dynasty, the 500-year period of the New Kingdom came to a close. The Third Intermediate Period that followed signalled the end of a society that had enjoyed security and a distinctive national identity for over 2000 years.

THE LANDSCAPE AND RESOURCES OF ANCIENT EGYPT

A knowledge of the physical environment of ancient Egypt is important for understanding both the history and the culture of this society. There is, of course, an obvious and direct relationship between features of landscape and climate and the economy and lifestyle of a people. However, these aspects also play an important part in shaping the values and attitudes of the people who lived together in this environment: values and attitudes both in relation to their own sense of national identity and their dealings with foreigners.

Three particularly important aspects of ancient Egyptian geography are:
- the concept of duality
- the Nile River and the inundation
- the borders of Egypt.

Duality

Upper and Lower Egypt

From the very beginning of recorded history, Egyptians developed the concept of duality or balance between opposing features. The first kings of Egypt were given the title ‘Lord of the Two Lands’ or ‘King of Upper and Lower Egypt’. This signified the importance of two distinctive areas:

- Lower Egypt in the north, which included the rich lands of the Nile Delta and the Old Kingdom capital of Memphis with its nearby cemeteries of Saqqara and Giza.
- Upper Egypt, which stretched from south of Memphis to the southern border at Aswan, the location of the First Cataract of the Nile.

Red Land–Black Land

Another aspect of this duality was the distinction between the fertile river valley and the desert. The area including the Delta and the narrow strip of land on either side of the Nile was called Kmt (pronounced ‘Kemet’), or the Black Land (black because of the rich black silt left behind after the annual flood). The barren, hostile desert surrounding it was called Dsrt (pronounced ‘Deshret’), or the Red Land (red for the hot desert sand). For the Egyptians, the Black Land represented an ordered life based on abundance provided by the predictable rhythm of the seasons. On the other hand, the Red Land represented a chaotic existence dominated by the scorching Egyptian sun, the searing heat and aridity of the desert, and its dangerous creatures such as scorpions, snakes, jackals and lions.

Order–chaos

This sense of duality was reflected in both Egyptian religious beliefs and political thinking. The Egyptians believed that there was a constant state of tension between the forces of order and chaos. The pharaoh as the chosen one of the gods was responsible for maintaining order within the Egyptian world. This concept of divine order was associated with the goddess Ma’at, who was the embodiment of truth, justice and stability. Disruption to the harmony within Egypt, political upheaval or natural disaster such as drought and famine was caused by the god Seth, bringer of chaos. Egyptian mythology reflects this conflict between order and chaos, good and evil, which can be seen in the battles between Horus and Seth.

The ‘gift of the Nile’

Everyone knows the famous quotation from Herodotus, the Greek historian: ‘Egypt is the gift of the Nile’. There would be no Egypt or Egyptian civilisation
without the Nile River. It provided a myriad of gifts for the Egyptian people. The most important of these was the annual inundation (flood) that left behind a layer of rich silt that ensured the growth of abundant crops. Besides this, the Nile provided various resources for the people of Egypt:
- irrigation for the growing of crops
- a means of transport
- a source of drinking water
- a source of food: fish, birds and game
- mud for making mud-bricks, a major building material
- papyrus, for boats and writing materials.

**Egypt’s borders**

The land of Egypt was defined by natural borders on all sides. To the north was the Mediterranean Sea, called ‘the Great Green’ by the Egyptians. Egypt’s southern border with Nubia was formed by the First Cataract of the Nile River at Aswan. Here, the river’s flow was interrupted by huge outcrops of granite, which during the flood caused rapids that made navigation difficult. The Red Sea formed a natural boundary to the east, while to the west was the vast expanse of the Libyan Desert.

Because of the security provided by its natural borders, Egyptian civilisation developed in relative isolation from foreign influences. This tended to produce an attitude of self-sufficiency and superiority. Egyptians must also have considered themselves better off than their neighbours with their abundant resources, which they managed carefully. Their attitude to foreigners indicated a certain degree of xenophobia (fear of foreigners). This, however, seems to have been modified during the period of empire building in the New Kingdom when Egyptians saw the benefits to be gained through trade and cultural contacts.

**Neighbours**

Apart from Nubia in the south, Egypt’s most important neighbours were Syria and Palestine to the north-east, and the powerful kingdoms of the Hittites and the Babylonians. Relations with these countries differed throughout the Ramesside period and were based on a number of factors including conquest, diplomacy and trade. The most significant development in this period was the great peace treaty between Egypt and the Hittites during the reign of Ramesses II. This treaty ended generations of conflict between Egypt and its northern neighbours. A long period of peace followed, which was interrupted only by invasions from Libyans of the western desert and increasing threats from the ‘Sea Peoples’, marauding bands of displaced boat people from the north.
Natural resources

Apart from the Nile and its bounty, Egypt enjoyed a wide variety of mineral and other resources. Within its own borders were rich deposits of gold that had been mined from earliest times. Areas surrounding the Wadi Hammamat in the east and the deserts near Edfu in the south were important sources. Aswan was the major source of granite, used for a variety of building projects, especially obelisks and statues. As well it supplied the precious stones carnelian and amethyst. Egyptian kings sent expeditions to Sinai to mine turquoise, a stone highly valued for royal jewellery. Nubia to the south was rich in gold, ebony, stone for statues and monuments, panther skins and ostrich feathers, which explains the Egyptian pharaohs’ enthusiasm for keeping it under firm control.

The oases to the west provided valuable deposits of raw materials for the New Kingdom Egyptians. The Kharga, Dakhla and Siwa oases were famous for their wines and dates, while the Wadi Natrun to the west of the Delta provided the natron which was essential for mummification ritual practices.

Find answers to the following questions.

- Where was the source of the Nile?
- How did the Egyptians explain the phenomenon of the annual flood?
- What gods were associated with the Nile?

Activity

Make a copy of the map in Figure 1.1. Locate and highlight the following features:

- the Delta
- Upper Egypt
- Lower Egypt
- Aswan
- Memphis
- Thebes
- Wadi Hammamat
- Kharga, Dakhla and Siwa oases
- Mediterranean Sea
- Red Sea
- Libya
- the Nile valley
- Red Land
- Black Land
- Nubia.

Make a mind map of Egypt’s resources using the following categories:

- mineral resources
- the Nile
- natural resources.

Using the mind-map summary write a paragraph about the resources of Egypt. Write definitions for the following terms: delta, cataract, oasis, wadi, inundation and silt.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The pharaoh

What is the king of Upper and Lower Egypt? ... He is a god by whose dealings one lives, the father and mother of all men...

(Inscription from the Theban tomb of the vizier Rekhmire)

The word ‘pharaoh’ is the Greek form of the ancient Egyptian term ‘per-aa’ which means ‘great house’. It originally referred to the palace of the king rather than to the king himself. Like many ancient rulers, the Egyptian pharaoh enjoyed absolute power over his subjects. He was the embodiment both of earthly and divine authority, and was regarded as god and king by his people.

Evidence for the role of the king and his link to the gods can be found in the royal titulary, the names or titles that all pharaohs bore. In addition to his personal name received at birth, each pharaoh acquired four other titles when he came to the throne. Every royal inscription, moreover, was prefaced by a section that listed the king’s titles and epithets.

The kingship was usually passed from father to son and the New Kingdom saw vivid portrayals of some rulers’ attempts to show their unquestioned right to the position. For example, Ramesses II had scenes of his divine conception and birth carved on the walls of the Ramesseum.

The pharaoh and the concept of Maat

The primary duty of the pharaoh as the representative of the gods was to maintain the divine order, called ‘Maat’, which had been established at the beginning of creation. The world had been created out of a watery chaos, and life as the Egyptians saw it was in continual tension between order and chaos. The concept of Maat embodied truth, justice and the essential harmony of the universe. Maat was usually represented as a goddess wearing an ostrich feather. Her power regulated
the seasons, the movement of the stars and the relations between the people and their gods.

The pharaoh’s duty was to maintain this cosmic order. This was primarily accomplished by daily offerings to the gods manifested in cult statues in the temples. These rituals were usually delegated to the high priests and their attendants. The Egyptians believed that in return for these attentions to their daily needs, the gods would protect them and keep the forces of chaos at bay.

Because the pharaoh was the chief channel of divine power and guidance he exercised supreme authority in the land and all aspects of Egyptian life were his responsibility. He was therefore chief priest of all the religious cults, chief judge and supreme commander of the army. As mediator between the gods and people the king’s religious role was of particular importance. To ensure their continued ability to carry out this ritual role, some pharaohs conducted a Sed festival, or Jubilee festival.

For further investigation

Choose one pharaoh from each of the New Kingdom dynasties and compile a short dossier on each one. Find the following:
- their titles
- pictures of statues and reliefs showing the image that each pharaoh projected
- the significant achievements of each pharaoh’s reign. You could present this information as a mind-map, arranging your information according to military, building, political, religious and economic achievements.

Activity: writing task

Write an essay response to the following question:
- What was the position and role of the pharaoh in New Kingdom society?
The royal wives

As well as being head of the government, the pharaoh was also the head of the royal family. Supporting him were a number of women usually referred to as ‘queens’. It is important to note that there were several types of queen (see Table 1.2).

Queens were sometimes the sister or the half-sister of the pharaoh but daughters of commoners were also chosen and could become ‘great royal wife’. The families of such women were probably prominent members of the official class, or if not were likely to become so on the elevation of their female relatives. Some pharaohs of this period seem to have married their own daughters. Ramesses II’s daughters Bint Anath, Meritamun and Nebettawy became ‘great royal wives’ of their father and Bint Anath even bore him a child.

Diplomatic marriages

Ramesside pharaohs also married the daughters of neighbouring powers to reinforce diplomatic alliances. Some were the daughters of the pharaoh’s equals, sent to assure friendly relations between the two powers. Others were sent by their vassal fathers as signs of their loyalty and submission to Egypt. In addition to a Babylonian princess and the daughter of a Syrian ruler, Ramesses II married two Hittite princesses (see Chapter 7). The first of these marriages took place in Year 34 of his reign and confirmed the peace treaty, ending the hostilities between Egypt and Khatti. The following source shows the diplomatic role played by the Hittite princess.

Source 1.1

Now after they saw their land in this miserable state under the great power of the Lord of the Two Lands, then the great prince of Khatti said to his soldiers and his courtiers: ‘Now see this! Our land is devastated…Let us strip ourselves of all our possessions, and with my oldest daughter in front of them, let us carry peace offerings to the Good god [i.e. the king of Egypt], that he may give us peace, that we might live. Then he caused his oldest daughter to be brought, the costly tribute before her consisting of gold and silver, many great ores, innumerable horses, cattle sheep and...
goats…was led into the presence of his majesty, with the very great tribute behind her…She was given the name Maathorneferure, may she live…and caused to reside in the palace of the king’s house.

G. Robins, Women in Ancient Egypt, pp. 33–4

Diplomatic marriages such as those of Ramesses II involved the housing of numerous women: both the new queens themselves and their numerous attendants. It is thought that some of these women went into the pharaoh’s harim where they would have been put to work spinning and weaving, a traditional occupation of Egyptian women. An establishment of women textile workers was known to exist in the Faiyum where Maathorneferure herself lived. Interestingly, Egyptian princesses were never sent away as brides for foreign rulers. In this way Egypt maintained its superiority over its neighbours.

The role of the queen
Like the pharaoh, the queen seems to have been linked to the gods. This can be seen in the regalia commonly worn by the ‘king’s mother’ and the ‘great royal wife’:

- the vulture headdress (worn by Queen Nefertari in Figure 7.2 on p.197) originally worn by the vulture goddess Nekhbet
- the uraeus or cobra (worn by Queen Nefertiti in Figure 4.6) associated with the cobra goddess Wadjet
- the double or shuty feathers, later combined with cow horns and sun disk (worn by Queen Tiye in Figure 4.12) associated with the goddess Hathor.

Important queens, the pharaoh’s mother or his ‘great royal wife’, had palaces of their own, supported by the income of lands and cattle, and administered by male officials. These queens performed ritual roles alongside the pharaoh and are shown making offerings to the gods and shaking a sistrum. The mother of the pharaoh was especially important and could enjoy greater prominence in her son’s reign than in that of her husband. Ramesses II’s mother, Tuya, is a good example of this (see Chapter 7). Sometimes the pharaoh’s mother was given the title ‘Great king’s wife’ in her son’s reign even though she had not held it previously.

Some Egyptian queens played an active role in diplomacy. Both Tuya, mother of Ramesses II, and her daughter-in-law, Nefertari, wrote to the Hittite king and queen on the occasion of the peace treaty between their two countries (see ‘The Queens’, Chapter 7).

The full extent of the political role of the queen is unclear. No queen consort of the Ramesside period appears to have achieved the political status of Nefertiti of the 18th Dynasty. The exception is Twosret, queen of Seti II, who acted as regent for her stepson Siptah on her husband’s death. Traditionally the wife of the dead king acted as regent for the new pharaoh when he was too young to rule in his own right. When Siptah died after six years on the throne, Twosret declared herself queen and assumed all the titles of a king. Her reign lasted for only two years.

The harim
Today we associate the word ‘harim’ with groups of women kept exclusively for the sexual pleasure of a ruler. In Egypt, however, a harim merely referred to

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**Table 1.2 Queens**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of queen</th>
<th>Description and role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Queen regnant     | • ruled as king  
                    • one queen in the Ramesside period assumed kingly titles and ruled as pharaoh; Twosret ruled in the name of her stepson Siptah and became ruler on his death |
| Great royal wife  | • the chief consort of the king  
                    • often depicted on monuments next to the king |
| King’s mother     | • held a position of importance in the royal household  
                    • often depicted on monuments and in reliefs alongside the king  
                    • traditionally acted as regent for a king who was too young to rule in his own right  
                    • became the most important woman in the hierarchy after her son became king |
| King’s wives      | • other women who were married to the king  
                    • some enjoyed particular favour with the king  
                    • some were foreign women married to the king for diplomatic reasons |
the women of the royal household and had no particular sexual connotation. It was an independent institution financed by royal taxes and housed royal women, their children and attendants. Like the establishments of important queens, harims possessed their own lands and cattle and had male officials to administer them. The best known example of a harim is one that existed at Medinet el-Ghurab in the Faiyum. Archaeological evidence from this site reveals that the weaving of linen was undertaken by the residents. Maathorneferure, the Hittite princess married by Ramesses, is known to have lived in this harim.

At times the harim became the centre of political conspiracy as some royal women sought to manipulate the succession of the next pharaoh. A papyrus now located in Turin in Italy records such a conspiracy that took place in the reign of Ramesses III. It appears that a lesser queen named Tiy, wishing to put her son Pentwere on the throne, conspired with her son, other women of the harim and some palace officials to assassinate Ramesses III. The conspiracy failed and the prince, together with several of his co-conspirators, had to commit suicide. There is no record of the punishment given to the women involved but it is not difficult to imagine that they would have suffered similar fates.

The nobility

The highest social rank beneath the king and the royal family was the nobility, which comprised members of the court who would have enjoyed special privileges because of their relationship with the royal family. Others bearing noble status were those men and women who saw to the personal needs of the royal family, such as their clothing and daily toilet.

The nobility also included officials or bureaucrats who occupied all the important positions in the state administration. Each of the departments of government (as shown in Figure 1.4 on p. 13) was headed by a chief official who was supported by a host of minor officials, especially scribes, who carried out the detailed day-to-day administrative work. Since administration relied on careful record-keeping, the ability to read and write was a basic prerequisite for a position in the bureaucracy. The whole Egyptian political, economic and religious system depended upon the administrative skills of the scribal class. The highest scribal officials enjoyed noble status and often passed on their positions to their sons.

The vizier—the king’s deputy

The most important member of the state bureaucracy was the vizier, who supervised the work of other officials and acted as the king’s deputy, bearing responsibility for all the major departments of government. The officials who reported to the vizier included overseers or managers of the treasury, the granary, the military, the religious cults, the state building projects and many others. Officials from the provinces such, as district governors and town mayors, were also answerable to him.

During the New Kingdom period, the administration of the state became increasingly complex. Egyptian conquest and trade with neighbouring countries required administrative support, both at home and abroad. It was common practice at this time to split the office of the vizier into two, with a vizier in the north controlling the northern part of Upper Egypt and the Delta, while the Theban vizier controlled the south.

During the 19th and 20th Dynasties, even though the capital had moved to Pi-ramesses, the vizier of the south continued to enjoy equal status with the vizier of the north.

Important evidence about the role of the vizier comes from texts called The Installation of the Vizier and The Duties of the Vizier. Originally found in four 18th Dynasty viziers’ tombs, the best known being that of Rekhmire, vizier of Thutmose III, these texts became a standard formula for the duties of the vizier. They appeared in fragmentary form in 19th Dynasty tombs as well; for example, that of Paser, a vizier of Ramesses II. Following are sections of the famous text, best preserved in Rekhmire’s tomb, which describe the vizier’s duties.

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**Source 1.2**

... the vizier is to enter to greet the monarch—life, prosperity and health to him—and the state of the land may be reported to him [the king] daily in his palace...

It is he who dispatches every official of the royal domain and who sends to nomarchs [district governors] and heads of divisions... They are to report to him all that has happened in their zones at the beginning of each four-monthly season, and they are to bring to him the official scribes attached to them and their council.

It is he who sees that soldiers mobilise and move as an escort of the monarch when he sails north or south...

It is he who sends out men to cut down sycamores, following a decision of the royal domain. It is he who dispatches mayors and heads of divisions for summer tillage...
Report is to be made to him of the state of the southern fortress and of the arrest of anyone who attempts a raid... It is he who is to take measures against the plunderer of any nome and it is he who is to judge him...

It is he who hears all law cases... It is he who opens the House of Gold in conjunction with the high treasurer. It is he who inspects the tribute of Byblos [modern Lebanon]... It is he who makes inventories of all oxen... It is he who inspects the water supply on the first of every ten-day period...

[Report is to be made to him of] the ascent of Sirius and the slackening of the Nile...

Report is to be made to him of all that ought to be reported...

N. de Garis Davies, The Tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes, pp. 92–3

Understanding and using the sources

♦ List the duties of the vizier that deal with
  – taxation and revenue
  – agriculture
  – communication and government appointments
  – law and order.
♦ Why would matters relating to irrigation and water supply be subject to the control of the vizier?

Activity: empathy task

Imagine you are a vizier like Paser. Prepare a written report, which you will present to the pharaoh at the beginning of a typical day.

‘Mistress of the house’

As in any time of human history, when we speak of the women of New Kingdom Egypt we are not referring to one homogeneous group. Women appear to have shared the same social status as their husbands or fathers, with the women of the royal and upper classes clearly leading different lives from those of their lower-born sisters.

Evidence suggests that women of the upper class did not generally take part in the same sorts of activities as their menfolk, but were expected to remain at home for most of the time and manage their domestic affairs. Reliefs from tombs indicate that these included weaving, caring for animals and producing craft items as well as the more usual baking, brewing and cooking. Servants were available to women of this class to do most of the actual work. Bringing up their children obviously would have taken up a large amount of their time, but these women, belonging to the upper class, would have had the advantage of wet nurses and nannies.

In the New Kingdom high-ranking women constituted the majority of women who served in the temples, mostly of goddesses like Hathor, Isis and Sekhmet, as priestesses or providers of music. They also worked in funerary temples preparing sacrifices for the dead. We do not know for certain whether these women were literate. Letters exist that were written by women to both men and other women, but we cannot tell whether they were written by scribes or by their own hands. Any other evidence, like the presence of a scribal palette beneath the chair of the tomb-owner’s wife in some tomb reliefs, is open to interpretation.

The workers’ village at Deir el-Medina offers evidence of the lives of women of slightly lower status. Although made up of workers, the community living here was maintained by the government and so was not typical of workers throughout New Kingdom Egypt. Here women would not have owned as many servants as higher class homes, so the ‘mistress of the house’ most likely carried out more of the domestic duties herself. The production of bread, beer and other foodstuffs was her major duty after caring for her children. Any time left was spent on weaving, according to documents from the village.

There is very little information available on the lives of women of the lower classes of the Ramesside period. Even daily-life scenes on tomb reliefs of the 18th Dynasty rarely show peasant women. When women are shown, we must remember, they are participating in scenes designed to help the deceased, usually a male of the upper classes. Such scenes cannot help being biased. Because 19th Dynasty private tombs largely favoured illustrations from funerary texts it becomes even more difficult to find evidence. We must conjecture that the women of this class were most probably occupied with household tasks like child rearing, preparing food, weaving cloth, etc. It is unlikely that they had servants, so this work would have been done by the women themselves. It is most likely that they also worked in the fields either on a regular basis, or at least during times of harvest or when extra labour was required. Women of this class could work outside their homes as servants.

Some Egyptian women of the New Kingdom were slaves, known only to us through documents that record their sale or purchase. The details of their lives can only be imagined.
For further investigation

- There is some fascinating evidence about the lives and roles of New Kingdom Egyptian women and children. Investigate the following topics: childhood and adolescence, family life, courtship and marriage, pregnancy and childbirth, and economic status and legal rights.

Useful sources include:

- G. Robins, Women in Ancient Egypt, British Museum Press, 1993
- E. Strouhal, Life in Ancient Egypt, Cambridge University Press, 1992

The working class

The workers, both skilled and unskilled, made up the majority of the Egyptian population. The highest ranking members of this class were the scribes (sesh), the literate members of society. The scribal working class included secretaries and clerks, whose job was to keep careful records, especially in matters relating to taxation and state administration. Other skilled workers included artists and crafts people, such as sculptors, carpenters and jewellers, the most highly skilled of whom were employed in the pharaoh’s workshops. We have valuable information about these workers from the remains of the villages of Deir el-Medina, which housed the workers who built the pharaohs’ tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Other evidence comes from scenes in the private tombs of the 18th Dynasty, when it was the fashion to depict a variety of daily activities as part of the tomb decoration. Even though these scenes are rare in the 19th and 20th Dynasties, when scenes and texts of a strictly funerary nature predominated, it can be assumed that workers’ lives continued on in the same old ways.

By far the greatest majority of the Egyptian population consisted of unskilled workers, occupied mainly in agriculture—the mainstay of the Egyptian economy. Agricultural labourers, both male and female, worked on royal and noble estates tilling the soil and producing cereal crops such as wheat and barley, flax for the textile industry and vegetables like onions, garlic, leeks and lettuce. Other unskilled labourers included

![Figure 1.3](image-url) A scene from the tomb of the worker Ipy from Deir el-Medina, reproduced by Norman de Garis Davies. It shows a worker watering a garden with a shaduf. Note the small dog at the worker’s feet. The Egyptians were apparently very fond of domestic animals. At left is part of a small temple with the distinctive closed-bud papyrus column.
animal herders and fishermen, as well as the servants who attended to the needs of the nobility. They prepared food and wine for banquets, performed as musicians, singers and dancers and waited on their superiors. Temple servants carried out similar duties in the cults of the various gods.

Activity: writing task

Write an article entitled ‘Work in New Kingdom Egypt’ for a book on ancient Egypt designed for primary-school students. Include an activity section at the end of your article to test the students’ understanding. Suggested activities could include: a wonderword or crossword puzzle; short questions; fill in the blanks.

THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT

The administration of New Kingdom Egypt fell into three broad categories:

- The royal family—comprising the immediate members of pharaoh’s family and the court including the Queen-mother (if she was still alive), his chief wife and lesser wives, the princes and princesses. The royal quarters also included the sons of commoners who were being educated at the king’s expense. Known as ‘children of the kap’ (the nursery), these children were destined to be the next generation of officials.

- The internal administration—comprising the royal estate, the military and the religious and civil service headed by officials, such as viziers, chancellors and overseers. All of these officials were directly responsible to the king and enjoyed very high status as a result.

- External affairs—the administration of Egypt’s spheres of influence in Syria–Palestine was carried out by the governors of the north, who worked alongside local vassal kings or princes. Egypt’s Nubian affairs were administered by the viceroy of Kush, or ‘king’s son of Kush’.

Viziers

- highest ranking officials below the king; king’s personal deputy overseer of all other officials
- there were two viziers, one for the north and one for the south
- responsible for the efficient functioning of the civil administration, especially taxation
- chief judge of civil matters
- chief supervisor of the king’s building activities
- minister of war.

King’s son of Kush

- king’s representative in Nubia
- drawn from the highest official class
- assisted by two deputys for the provinces of Wawat and Kush
- collected annual tribute and taxes
- organised the gold mining operations.

Chief priest of Amun

- also known as the ‘first prophet of Amun’
- the king’s deputy in all religious services
- personally selected by the king
- controlled of all priests and high priests throughout Egypt
- had great wealth due to the property that went with the office
- joined the king in conducting religious rituals and festivals
- enjoyed great political influence, eventually ruling Egypt in the 21st Dynasty.

Crown prince

- eldest son of the king and heir to the throne
- sometimes commander-in-chief of the army.

Chancellor

- a chief official of the royal court
- referred to as the seal-bearer of the king—carried the king’s personal seal
- trusted confidant of the king
- king’s personal representative on trading and mining expeditions.

Commander-in-chief of the army

- responsible to the king as overall commander and to the vizier as minister of war
- position sometimes held by the king’s son.

The royal estate

The personal possessions of the king and royal family were extensive, and formed a branch of the government usually referred to as ‘the royal estate’. These possessions included vast areas of state agricultural land, called ‘crown land’, the crops and livestock of which provided both the food supply and general maintenance of the pharaonic administration. The affairs of the royal household were managed by key officials such as the chancellor, a personal confidant of the king and carrier of the king’s seal; the chief steward, who was responsible for the upkeep of provisions for the court; and the chamberlain, who served as chief butler to the king.
Military administration

The expulsion of the Hyksos and Egypt’s continued expansion, especially into Syria–Palestine, led to the development of a permanent, professional army. This maintained a strict hierarchical organisation headed by the pharaoh, who was advised by a council comprising the vizier and the most senior military officers. The main divisions of the army were the infantry and the chariotry; there were other units as well, each with its own hierarchy of officers. The vital role played by the military in both the creation and maintenance of the empire meant that army leaders enjoyed great status and influence. Like every other department of the government, the military relied on scribes to keep records of weapons and equipment, campaigns, casualties, booty and prisoners.

Religious administration

The religious administration was an important sector of Egyptian government during the New Kingdom. There were many cults in Egypt, facilitating the worship of different gods. These cults were administered by an overseer of prophets of all the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt, a position held by the chief priest of Amun, who was sometimes also the vizier. The temples, especially those of the Amun cult, were endowed by the pharaoh with huge estates. These temple estates provided the vast amounts of produce necessary for the daily religious offerings to the gods and the maintenance of large staffs of priests, officials, scribes, craftsmen and many others.

During the New Kingdom the cult that enjoyed the greatest power and prestige was the Amun cult. The kings bestowed many privileges upon the Amun cult; accordingly, the economic and political influence of the high priests of Amun grew significantly. They played an important role in government—so much so that by the end of the 20th Dynasty one high priest of Amun, or ‘first prophet’, took over the prerogatives of the pharaoh. The ‘second prophet’ had particular responsibility for temple property. He managed the estates and workshops where the gifts and booty dedicated to the god were stored, and he supervised the work of an army of lesser officials such as overseers and scribes.

The civil service

The civil service was responsible for most of the internal administration of Egypt. It was not unlike our public service, in which various departments are run by officials under the overall control of a head of department responsible, in turn, to the appropriate minister. In Egypt’s case the officials most like our ministers were the viziers of the north and the south. Answerable to them were the overseers of important departments like the treasury and the granaries (similar to our heads of department). The overseer of the treasury had the important responsibility for all taxation, which was paid largely in grain and cattle. This was stored in temple and state granaries for redistribution. The overseer of the granaries supervised a vast network of scribes who kept detailed records of...
the intake, storage and distribution of grain and other supplies. Other civil service officials controlled the judiciary and the police. At the local level there were provincial governors, town mayors and lesser officials.

**Imperial administration**

New Kingdom Egypt's external administration consisted of two sections: Syria–Palestine to the northeast and Nubia to the south.

**Syria–Palestine**

Some regions, such as Beth Shan and Gaza, were under the authority of a governor appointed by Egypt. Below these were the vassal princes—local rulers of conquered cities and towns who were left in charge of their own affairs on condition that they took an oath acknowledging the sovereignty of the pharaoh, kept the peace and paid annual tribute to their Egyptian overlords. Other administrators of this region were the garrison commanders, who were in charge of Egyptian troops stationed at key forts.

**Nubia**

This area was administered by a governor or viceroy known as the ‘king’s son of Kush’. It was divided into two regions: Wawat in the north and Kush in the south. Each was controlled by a deputy and, below them, mayors of Egyptian colonies and local Nubian chieftains. Because the control of the Nubian gold-mines was important to Egypt, colonies of Egyptian settlers were established to protect Egypt’s interests.

**For further investigation**

See what you can find out about the following officials and record your information in a table. The table should include such headings as ‘Name’, ‘Position’, ‘Pharaoh served’, ‘Career details’.

- Vizier: Paser
- Viceroy of Kush: Panhesy
- Chief priest of Amun: Herihor
- Crown prince: Ramesses II
- Chancellor: Bay
- Commander-in-chief of the army: Seti I

**Activity: empathy task**

Imagine that you are a young scribe from a provincial town who has come to the pharaoh’s court to work for the vizier. Write a letter to your family describing the officials you have met at court and detailing what you have learnt of their duties.
THE MILITARY

New Kingdom Egypt’s standing army was used by the pharaohs of the Ramesside period to re-establish and maintain the empire forged in the early 18th Dynasty. The army served as a focus for the revived nationalism apparent in the reigns of Seti I and his son, Ramesses II. Soldiers of the pharaoh campaigned against ‘the miserable Asiatics’ and the ‘wretched Kush’—terms used by Egyptian propagandists to describe Egypt’s enemies.

Composition of the army

Evidence suggests that in the early 18th Dynasty the army was composed of two divisions. This increased to three in the reign of Seti I and to four under his son Ramesses II (1290–1224 BC). The four divisions were named after the gods Amun, Ptah, Seth and Re—possibly patron deities associated with the regions where the divisions were formed. Each division was commanded by a general.

In addition to infantry contingents, which included units of spearmen and archers, the New Kingdom army included contingents of chariots led by the pharaoh himself. An elite infantry corps, known as the ‘braves of the king’, formed the spearhead of infantry attacks. The organisation of the army was as follows:
- division: approximately 5000 soldiers
- host: approximately 500 soldiers
- company: 250 soldiers
- platoon: 50 soldiers
- squad: 10 soldiers.

As the Egyptian army progressively conquered neighbouring regions it incorporated foreign troops as extra contingents or auxiliaries: the Nubian archers, for example, were a particularly skilled unit. There were also units from Syria–Palestine and Libya. Conquered regions were controlled by garrison troops stationed at strategically located forts.

Naval contingents appear largely to have been restricted to a transport and communications function. However, reliefs from the reign of Ramesses III show Egyptian archers engaged in combat against the so-called ‘sea-peoples’ who fought the Egyptians in the Delta.

Marching off to war: one view of a soldier’s life

The following 19th Dynasty source, from the Papyrus Anastasi III, is a text used in the education of scribes. It gives an interesting view of military life in the Ramesside period.

SOURCE 1.3

Come, I will describe to you the lot of the infantryman, the much exerted one: he is brought as a child of nbi and confined to a barrack. A painful blow is dealt to his body, a savage blow to his eye and a splitting blow to his brow. His head is split open with a wound. He is laid down and beaten like a piece of papyrus. He is lambasted with beatings. Come, I will describe to you his journey to the land of Khuru and his march over the hills: his bread and water are carried on his shoulders like a donkey’s burden. His neck becomes calloused, like a donkey’s, and the arches of his back are bent. He drinks foul-tasting water and halts to stand guard. When he reaches the enemy he is like a pinioned bird, with no strength in his limbs. If he succeeds in returning to Egypt he is like a stick that the woodworm has eaten—he is full of sickness. He is carried back in a state of paralysis on the back of a donkey. His clothes have been stolen and his retainer has run away.

Papyrus Anastasi III, cited in 1. Shaw, Egyptian Warfare and Weapons, p. 29

Understanding and using the sources

- List the sufferings described by the writer of this source.
- Why might the writer be presenting such a negative view of army life?
- Do you think this experience would have been typical for all infantrymen?
- How reliable do you consider the evidence provided by this source?
- When you have finished reading this section on the military, suggest reasons why a career in the army was attractive.

Weaponry and armour

The Egyptian infantryman was equipped with both long-range and short-range weapons. The most important long-range weapon was the bow. The earlier ‘self bow’, made of a wooden rod narrowed at either end, gave way to the ‘composite bow’ introduced by the Hyksos. This weapon was made of two convex sections joined at the centre, and had a greater range than the self bow. Other long-range weapons included spears, lances and boomerangs.

For hand-to-hand or close range combat the infantrymen carried battleaxes, sticks, spears, clubs and
flint daggers and *khepesh* daggers used for cutting, stabbing and slashing. Protective shields were made of wood covered with animal hide.

**New Kingdom innovation**

Imperial expansion in the New Kingdom forced the Egyptians to adopt the technology of their enemies in order to defeat them. One of the most important of these adoptions was the horse-drawn chariot, a light wooden vehicle manned by a driver and a warrior. This was a very significant innovation: the elite chariot corps, developed by the early New Kingdom pharaohs, gave the army mobility both in battle and in the pursuit of a routed enemy. The chariot quickly became a dominant symbol of the warrior pharaoh.

Another New Kingdom adoption was the Canaanite *khepesh* or scimitar, a curved sword that temple reliefs frequently depict the pharaohs wielding against their enemies. Body armour, such as linen or leather corselets reinforced with metal scales, was also used in this period. One such garment was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. Some troops in the New Kingdom wore Asiatic-style helmets made of leather or bronze.

**Military campaigning**

After the initial war of liberation against the Hyksos in the opening years of the New Kingdom, Egypt embarked on a period of empire building, waging wars of conquest in Nubia and Syria–Palestine. Our knowledge of the organisation and conduct of military campaigns is incomplete, although we do have detailed accounts of some campaigns from both royal and non-royal sources.

The following sections itemise the main features of New Kingdom military campaigns.

**Transportation**

The army was transported to Nubia by boat. Palestine was reached by marching across the Sinai desert. In later times the navy was used to transport men and supplies to Asiatic coastal cities, such as Byblos, for campaigns against Syria and Naharin. Thutmose III made collapsible boats for the crossing of the Euphrates River.

**Decision-making and tactics**

Pharaoh was the ultimate authority, but royal inscriptions suggest that councils of war involving the pharaoh and his generals facilitated the discussion of battle tactics.

The army usually launched a frontal attack on the enemy’s position, often a fortified town. Chariotry led the attack with the aim of rapidly encircling the enemy position and breaking through the front ranks of the enemy infantry. If the initial attack was unsuccessful, a siege was mounted and maintained until the occupants surrendered.

**Weapons and armour**

Weapons and armour as shown in Figure 1.6 were manufactured in the workshops of the royal palaces and temples.

**Spoils of war**

Captive peoples became slaves of the state and could be assigned to temple estates or given as rewards to distinguished soldiers. Other spoils included grain and livestock (especially horses) and manufactured goods including weapons, artwork and luxury items.

**Treatment of the defeated**

Some practices were as follows:

- wholesale slaughter—hands or genitals of the slain were cut off in order to tally the dead
- the taking of captives, especially women and children, and of hostages—sometimes sons and daughters of rebellious vassal princes were taken to Egypt and educated in Egyptian ways
- the execution of leaders of revolts—in one Nubian case the bodies were hung from the prow of pharaoh’s ship on his triumphant return
- the exacting of tribute—an annual tax in the form of local produce was paid by conquered towns, whose leaders swore oaths of allegiance to the pharaoh.

**For further investigation**

Such Ramesside pharaohs as Seti I, Ramesses II and Ramesses III have left records of their campaigns. Research the campaigns of one of these pharaohs, looking for specific details of their conduct. Write a paragraph on each aspect of campaigning as revealed in the sources.

**The economy**

From earliest times the backbone of the Egyptian economy was agriculture, which depended on the annual June–September flooding of the Nile River. After each year’s inundation, which deposited a rich layer of silt on the land, teams of government officials set to work re-establishing the old boundaries that had been swept away, creating new dykes and measuring the areas of land for the next taxation season.

Land ownership and private enterprise were virtually non-existent. Most of the agricultural land belonged to the pharaoh and was often distributed by him in the form of land grants to private individuals and the cults of the various gods. The royal and temple estates were therefore central to the economy. The
officials who managed these estates did so on behalf of the government and were responsible for their efficient operation.

The main crops were grain, including barley and different kinds of wheat such as emmer, einkorn and spelt, which were used in the production of bread and beer, the two chief staples of Egyptian life. The silt deposited each year by the Nile was extremely fertile; nevertheless, irrigation by hand was necessary, and New Kingdom Egyptians developed the shaduf, a simple mechanism designed to transfer water from the Nile to the fields under cultivation.

**Figure 1.6** This New Kingdom soldier is carrying a shield, spear and battleaxe. Surrounding him are: (a) self bow and recurved composite bow; (b) copper spear and halberd blade; (c) khepesh daggers; (d) throwing sticks; (e) chariot; (f) battleaxe.
One of our best sources of evidence for the annual agricultural cycle is the great variety of scenes adorning the tombs of the officials responsible for the administration of the economy. These scenes depict the various stages in crop production. The year comprised the flood season (June–September), the sowing season (October–February) and the harvest season (March–May). Tomb scenes often detail the harvesting and **threshing** of crops. The grain yield was separated from its husks by **winnowing** before being stored. Quantities were carefully measured and recorded by scribes. Government granaries bore particular economic importance because, in the absence of a money currency, agricultural yield formed the basis of the taxation system. Tax collection—conducted by treasury officials accompanied by scribes and by policemen carrying sticks—was perhaps the single most important task carried out by the central administration.

Taxation was calculated on the height of the annual inundation. In addition to agricultural produce, treasury officials assessed trees, ponds, canals, herds, flocks and the yield from hunting and fishing.

**Egypt’s economy depended on the distribution of raw materials and produce, including both imported goods and locally produced commodities such as barley, emmer, cattle, wine and linen. These goods were redirected by the royal storehouses as wages and salaries to artisans, officials, artists, priests and those not directly involved in food production.**

The Egyptians were careful accountants and inflicted severe penalties, including physical punishment, for tax evasion. Tomb scenes often depict the assessment of produce and collection of taxes by scribes; sometimes we see farmers being beaten for tax evasion.

In addition to grain and livestock, the Egyptians also produced a wide variety of fruit and vegetables for both domestic consumption and local trade.

**Internal trade**

Trade involved a sophisticated barter system that used a scale of value based on metal weights. The main standard used for small transactions was copper and the basic unit was one **deben** (equivalent to 93.3 grams). The value of any exchangeable commodity was expressed as a number of copper **deben**. For example, one coffin was valued at 25.5 **deben**, and in purchasing it the buyer would have tendered goods, such as goats and pigs, to this value.1

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**Domestic trade**

Domestic trade centred on the Nile, the main highway linking villages and towns. Evidence indicates that markets for small traders were set up at the quays and landing places where trading boats docked.

Official trade appears to have been conducted by male traders called **shuty**, who were employed either by temples or private persons to sell surplus goods in exchange for whatever goods their employers required. It is important to note that these traders were servants acting on behalf of their masters; a wealthy middle class of merchants never developed in Egypt.

**Source 1.4**

The merchants travel downstream and upstream. They are as busy as can be, carrying goods from one town to another. They supply him who has wants. But the tax collectors carry off the gold, that most precious of metals.

The ships’ crews from every house [of commerce], they receive their loads. They depart from Egypt for Syria, and each man’s god is with him. [But] not one of them says: ‘We shall see Egypt again!’


**Empire building—booty, tribute and trade**

The resources that flowed into Egypt during the New Kingdom came as a result of both warfare and peaceful trading activity. During the establishment of the empire, Egypt collected valuable booty from conquered towns and cities in the aftermath of successful military campaigns. This might be in the form of animals, especially horses, which were not known in Egypt before the New Kingdom; other livestock; grain and oils. Such plunder also included prisoners of war, who would often be given as rewards for bravery to successful soldiers.

**Tribute**

After a rebellious town had been conquered and the booty collected to be taken back to Egypt, the Egyptians required the town to pay an annual **tribute** or tax in the future, which represented a portion of their annual produce that might be raw materials or manufactured goods. Because Egypt did not possess quality timber for ship building, housing or furniture, the most valuable tribute from Palestine was the cedar and fir of Lebanon. Copper and lead, in the form of ingots, came from Syria–Palestine. The supervision of the tribute collection was the responsibility of special
commissioners, accompanied by a contingent of the Egyptian army.

This sense of ‘tribute’ as an annual tax paid by a vassal town was only one meaning of the word. The Egyptian word normally used for tribute was ‘inw’ meaning ‘things brought’. It could refer to any of the following:

- compulsory payment of annual taxes by conquered towns
- diplomatic gifts exchanged between Egypt and the rulers of independent neighbouring powers, such as the Babylonians or the Hittites
- goods exchanged through international trade.

### Trade

Trade outside Egypt was also conducted through the barter system. Most of this activity took the form of royal missions on behalf of the king or the state temples, which also possessed trading fleets and merchants to carry out their activities. Egypt had carried on trade with neighbouring countries since Old Kingdom times, but this trade expanded enormously as a result of military conquest in the New Kingdom. Merchants and traders followed in the footsteps of the soldiers, and new and exotic goods made their way into Egypt from places as far away as modern Afghanistan—a source of the highly prized blue lapis lazuli. Silver and ivory came from northern Syria and Babylon.

### A cosmopolitan society

The extensive political–commercial contacts that the Egyptians maintained with the Near East and Mediterranean states also had important consequences for Egyptian society and culture during this period. The large numbers of foreign prisoners of war, slaves and visitors brought new ideas and skills that appealed especially to the upper classes. Egyptians who travelled abroad, whether for military or ambassadorial purposes, returned home with a taste for many of the crafts and customs of the lands they had visited.

For example, many musical instruments were introduced from Asia. These included the long-necked lute, the lyre, the angled harp and the double flute. The Syrian musicians who introduced them must

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**TABLE 1.3 Egyptian weights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Weight/capacity</th>
<th>Metal standard/commodity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kite</td>
<td>9–10 grams</td>
<td>silver, gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deben</td>
<td>93.3 grams (1 deben = 10 kite)</td>
<td>copper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hinw</td>
<td>0.47 litres</td>
<td>grain and liquid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hekat</td>
<td>4.77 litres (10 hinw = 1 hekat)</td>
<td>grain and liquid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khar</td>
<td>75.2 litres (1 khar = 160 hinw)</td>
<td>grain and liquid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khay</td>
<td>1/3 hin</td>
<td>grain and liquid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**FIGURE 1.7** This beautiful silver jug with a golden goat-shaped handle was part of a hoard of vessels discovered at Bubastis (near modern Zagazig) in the Delta. It was part of a collection belonging to Ramesses II. The workmanship of the vessel includes vertical lines of overlapping heart-shaped scales, above which are two engraved registers that feature griffins and other animals attacking their prey and small human figures fowling in the marshes.
have popularised new melodies and dances. Likewise, Syrian motifs depicted on garments worn by Egyptians remind us that Syrians were frequently employed as weavers.

**The Egypto-Hittite peace treaty**

Egypt enjoyed a new era of prosperity in the aftermath of the Egypto-Hittite peace treaty, during the reign of Ramesses II. Egypt could now trade with a number of places that had formerly been enemies. Amurru was well known for its wine, Takhsy and Naharin for oil, Palestine for grapes and figs, and Ashkelon for silver-ware. Merchant ships regularly plied between Egypt and the distant northern coastal ports of Ugarit, Tyre and Arvad.

The building of the new capital at Pi-Ramesse by Ramesses greatly facilitated trade and communication between Egypt and her northern neighbours. Memphis particularly became a much more cosmopolitan city than in former times. Merchants from Canaan set up a permanent settlement in its northern suburbs and built a temple there to their own god Ba’al.

**Decline**

The economy remained buoyant throughout the 19th and first half of the 20th Dynasty. However, after the reign of Ramesses III, Egypt’s fortunes both at home and abroad began to suffer and economic decline set in. Egypt was able to repulse the repeated attacks of the Libyans and ‘Sea Peoples’ throughout the Ramesside period, but the insistent pressure caused by the waves of migrations and attacks by these ‘Sea Peoples’ on Syria–Palestine, finally destroyed the Hittites and led to the emergence of new powers in the region. Egypt’s hold on its foreign possessions in both Syria–Palestine and Nubia was thus greatly weakened and by the end of the 20th Dynasty, the empire had ceased to exist. Evidence of Egypt’s inferiority in the eyes of neighbouring powers that had formerly bowed down to her, can be seen in the famous Report of Wenamun.

Ramesses III was the last really successful pharaoh of the New Kingdom, but the seeds of decline were already evident in his reign. Records from the village of Deir el-Medina give an account of a series of strikes by the workers because their ration payments of grain were in arrears. Records from the reign of Ramesses III and his successors reveal serious corruption in the civil administration. There were frequent abuses in the collection and distribution of food, for example, officials appropriating temple grain for their own purposes.

A particularly glaring example of this kind of corruption is preserved in a papyrus from the 20th Dynasty. It includes an account of long-term theft carried out by a ship’s captain named Khnum-nakht, who had a contract with the priests of the Temple of Khnum at the First Cataract. The contract stipulated that he was to transport to them each year 700 bags of grain from the Delta region. Table 1.4 is from a papyrus that records nine years of theft committed by Khnum-nakht.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Sacks delivered</th>
<th>Deficit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 of Ramses IV</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 of Ramses IV</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 of Ramses IV</td>
<td>‘He brought none of it’</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 of Ramses IV</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 of Ramses IV</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 of Ramses IV</td>
<td>‘He did not bring it’</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 of Ramses V</td>
<td>‘He did not bring it’</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 of Ramses V</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 of Ramses V</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>580</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An example of the economic decline of the period can also be seen in the fluctuating value of emmer wheat shown in Table 1.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Emmer Wheat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late Nineteenth – early Twentieth</td>
<td>Ramesses III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid Twentieth</td>
<td>Ramesses VII–IX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Twentieth</td>
<td>Ramesses XI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Understanding and using the sources
Apply your mathematical skills to Table 1.4 and calculate the following:

—What was the total number of sacks delivered by Khnum-nakht over the nine years shown in this table?
—What was the total number that should have been delivered?
—What percentage of the total number did Khnum-nakht actually deliver?

Does it seem likely that Khnum-nakht would have acted alone? Explain your answer.

Can you suggest reasons for the fluctuation in the value of emmer wheat as shown in Table 1.5?

Can you explain how fluctuations in the value of a staple commodity such as emmer wheat might have affected the economy of ancient Egypt?

From this period too we have evidence of robbery of both royal and private tombs at Thebes. A decline in temple building (one of the traditional driving forces of the Egyptian economy) dating from this period of the 20th Dynasty is a sure indication of economic difficulties. These difficulties were probably the result of a number of factors, including diminished resources as well as corrupt and inefficient administration.

It has been suggested that the amount of cultivable land controlled by the king and his government diminished significantly during the later New Kingdom. This may have been the result of the king granting tax exemptions to temples and private individuals. The Great Harris Papyrus provides some evidence of royal patronage of temples during the reign of Ramesses III. It documents royal gifts to the gods and their temples, as well as income and expenditure.

A combination of political and economic factors led to the end of the Ramesside period. Ramesses III was assassinated as the result of a harim conspiracy. After him came a further eight kings named Ramesses, ending with Ramesses XI. This period was characterised by:

- a decline in the power of the pharaoh
- a reduction in building
- a loss of control over Palestine
- tension between Upper and Lower Egypt that led to intermittent civil war
- division of the Kingdom into North, controlled by the pharaoh at Pi-ramesse and the Amun priesthood at Thebes
- the loss of Nubia during the reign of Ramesses XI.

For further investigation

Extend your knowledge and understanding of the New Kingdom economy by referring to these useful resources:

B. J. Kemp, Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilisation, especially chapter 6, ‘The birth of economic man’

J. A Wilson, The Culture of Ancient Egypt, chapter 10, ‘Where is the glory?’

B. G. Trigger et al., Ancient Egypt: A Social History, chapter 3, ‘New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period’.

DAILY LIFE

Lifestyle of the rich and famous

If the ancient Egyptians had not gone to such trouble to equip their tombs with all the paraphernalia required for the afterlife, we would know very little indeed about their earthly lives. For the Egyptians really believed that they could take it all with them when they died, and so those who could afford to do so spared no expense in provisioning their tombs for an eternity of happiness and plenty in the hereafter.

Our evidence, therefore, comes almost entirely from the tombs of the wealthy elite, those members of the court and upper levels of the administration who represented the tip of the Egyptian social pyramid. The scenes of their lives that adorn the walls of their tombs offer the richest evidence. Their tombs were also equipped with furniture, clothing and personal belongings, but sustained looting by grave-robbers over the centuries has left little material evidence.

A comfortable life—house and garden

The houses of the wealthy, particularly the villas on country estates, were built of white-plastered, sun-dried mud brick. A typical villa was set in a high-walled garden containing trees, exotic plants, a well and a pool or pond.

The great officials of the Ramesside period, such as the vizier Paser who served Ramesses II, would have also owned a townhouse close to the royal palace in Pi-ramesse. A townhouse was similar in design to the villa but without the spacious gardens. It might have had two storeys, containing public and private rooms. Like the houses of the less wealthy, lighting was provided by small windows located near the ceiling, no
doubt to minimise the effects of the hot Egyptian sun. Winter heat was supplied by small, portable braziers, on which charcoal was burned.

For further investigation

Research the lifestyle of the New Kingdom wealthy classes, both women and men. Find information about some of the following topics. You might think of some others as your research progresses.

- food and drink
- make-up
- clothing and fashion
- personal hygiene
- jewellery
- contraception

Living it up—what Egyptians did for fun

Most evidence for New Kingdom leisure pursuits comes from tomb decoration, so its funerary nature must be taken into account. However, surviving artifacts offer further evidence. Leisure activities seem to have included sports (mostly to do with hunting, swimming and gymnastics) as well as games (including board games) and singing, dancing and feasting. Men, women and children seem to have engaged in such activities, and social class played a role in what activities were available.

Hunting

Hunting was certainly the sport of kings, courtiers and dignitaries. New Kingdom tomb paintings depict bird-hunts in the marshes of the Delta and the remaining marshlands of Upper Egypt. The best time for hunting was at the end of the floods, when the water was still high enough to allow small boats, made of papyrus reeds, to be rowed up to the hidden nesting places.

Fishing was another popular New Kingdom sport. Anglers are known to have fished with rods while sitting in armchairs around their garden pools. Hippopotamus hunting is also shown in New Kingdom Theban tombs, though this animal had long disappeared from the area. This alerts us to the need for care in interpreting tomb scenes of daily life. Lise Manniche feels that this representation was symbolic, indicating the tomb owner’s ability to master evil and danger.²

New Kingdom pharaohs were fond of hunting and liked to advertise their prowess. Seti I engaged in lion hunting and Ramesses III added wild cattle to the royal repertoire. The hunting of game from the safety of the chariot seems to date from the reign of Thutmose IV, and nobles as well as pharaohs hunted in this way.

Social entertainment

Gymnastics and athletic games appear to have been popular leisure pursuits. Young men were trained in archery, boxing, wrestling and fighting with sticks. The first international stick-fencing championships were staged, during the reign of Ramesses II, between the pharaoh’s young soldiers and units of foreign troops.

Board games seem to have been very popular in the New Kingdom. Senet is the best known of these; it was played on a board of wood, stone, clay, bone or faience, or even on a grid cut into the ground. In the New Kingdom senet seems to have taken on funerary significance. Not only was the game board represented on tomb walls (as in the tomb of Queen Nefertari), but it was also included among funerary goods. Other board games included taw or ‘twenty squares’, played by two people facing each other; and mehen or the ‘snake game’, which could be played by up to six peo-

FIGURE 1.8 A scene from the first pylon of the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu shows the pharaoh hunting wild bulls

ple who moved dog-, lion- and ball-shaped pieces. Unfortunately, the rules of these games remain a mystery.

For the ordinary Egyptian citizen, leisure activities probably took place in evenings after work and on days off (the workers at Deir el-Medina had one day off in ten) and on the many public holidays. Some of these holidays were annual (New Year and harvest festival), but others might be special religious festivals like the Festival of the Valley or royal celebrations associated with coronations or the pharaoh’s Sed festival. Some leisure time was probably spent in inns, beer houses and brothels.

Some tombs feature banquets with large numbers of guests. Fashionable ladies are shown with cones of scented fat on their heads, being attended by servant girls and entertained by singers, musicians and dancers.

Activity

Construct a crossword puzzle or wonderword using the following terms relating to New Kingdom daily life and leisure: hunting, gymnastics, fishing, ostrich, boomerang, archery, wrestling, fighting, boxing, stick fencing, senet, mehen, taw, banquets, scented fat, acrobats.

Religion

The significance of Amun

Amun was one of the most important gods in the New Kingdom pantheon. As chief god of the state religion, Amun was the patron god who legitimised the rule of the pharaoh. Amun, whose name means ‘the hidden one’, was originally a god of the sky; usually depicted as a human figure, he is sometimes shown with a ram’s head, wearing a crown containing two feathers. Each feather is divided vertically into two sections representing the dualism of balanced opposites, such as Upper and Lower Egypt. The ram was Amun’s sacred animal, and probably represented the creative power or fertility of the god. Woserhat, the magnificent festival boat of Amun, had a ram’s head at its prow and stern, and the processional roads that led to Amun’s temple were lined with ram-headed sphinxes, each guarding a statue of the pharaoh between its front paws.

Amun is first mentioned in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts, but by Middle Kingdom times he had become the chief god of the Theban region. He rose to prominence under the Theban kings of the late 17th and early 18th Dynasties.

Amun-Re

Amun’s particular success during this period may also be attributed to his combination with the powerful god Re, the sun-god who had been the major deity during the Old Kingdom. Under the patronage of Amun-Re—the Theban manifestation of the sun-god—the Hyksos were driven from Egypt and the conquest of both Nubia and Syria–Palestine was accomplished. One of the most important sacred symbols of the sun-god was the obelisk, a tapering, needle-like stone monument with a pyramid-shaped tip called a pyramidion. Many New Kingdom pharaohs erected magnificent obelisks in honour of Amun-Re within his great temple at Karnak.

Kingship and the gods

All pharaohs were regarded as the earthly representative or son of the god. This is clear from their kingly titles: the living king was Horus and the dead king was Osiris.

Ramesside pharaohs continued the 18th Dynasty practice, begun by Hatshepsut, of emphasising their relationship with the gods by depicting their divine birth in temple reliefs. Fragmentary reliefs from the Ramessuem, the Theban mortuary temple built by Ramesses II, suggest his claim that Amun-Re impregnated his mother, Tuya, making him the son of the god.

The Temple of Karnak

The state cult of Amun was conducted chiefly in his great temple at Karnak in Thebes. The Egyptians
called it ‘Ipet-isut’ (‘the most favoured of places’). This site had been sacred to Amun since Middle Kingdom times but from the beginning of the 18th Dynasty it began to assume major importance. Successive New Kingdom pharaohs erected shrines, pylons, obelisks and other structures within the temple, expressing their devotion to Amun. Pharaohs would often demolish the structures of their predecessors and reuse the material for their own building programs in order to build better monuments for this god. The pharaohs also ordered the construction and endowment of numerous other shrines and temples to Amun throughout both Egypt and the conquered territories.

The Temple of Karnak is a huge complex of religious buildings covering over a hundred hectares. It contains three major sacred precincts dedicated to the gods Amun-Re, his consort Mut and a local warrior god named Montu. Smaller temples were dedicated to Ptah, Opet and Khons, the latter being the son of Amun-Re and Mut.

The main temple, dedicated to Amun-Re, was built on two axes, each consisting of a succession of processional gateways called ‘pylons’, and courtyards interspersed with obelisks, chapels, shrines, statues, stelae and altars. At the heart of the temple stood the sanctuary, containing a golden statue of the god—the focus of the daily offerings to Amun.

The earliest axis of the temple stretches from west to east and includes the Great Hypostyle Hall, a magnificent courtyard containing 134 pillars and covering an area of over five hectares. It was completed by Ramesses II. The oldest part of the temple, built by Thutmose I, is located in the centre. Later pharaohs extended the temple by adding pylons and other buildings in front of these structures so that each new pair of pylons would have created a new and even grander processional entrance to all that lay behind. A large sacred lake, the focus of important daily rituals, occupies the junction between the two axes.

Much of this building activity was financed from the revenue of successful foreign campaigns and imperial tribute. The temple also became the storehouse of plundered booty, delivered to the god as gifts and thank-offerings for the victories accomplished in Amun’s name.

Dedications to Amun

The following extract from the Kadesh Battle Inscription of Ramesses II catalogues pharaonic offerings made to Amun. In this extract, Ramesses, surrounded by the Hittite army at Kadesh and seeking the god’s aid, lists the many ways in which he has honoured Amun.

\[ \text{SOURCE 1.5} \]

\[ \text{Have I not made for you many great monuments,} \]
\[ \text{Filled your temple with my booty,} \]
\[ \text{Built for you my mansion of Millions-of-Years,} \]
\[ \text{Given you all my wealth as endowment?} \]
\[ \text{I brought you all lands to supply your altars,} \]
\[ \text{I sacrificed to you ten thousands of cattle,} \]
\[ \text{And all kinds of sweet-scented herbs.} \]
\[ \text{I did not abstain from any good deed,} \]
\[ \text{So as not to perform it in your court.} \]
\[ \text{I built great pylons for you,} \]
\[ \text{Myself I erected their flagstaffs;} \]
\[ \text{I brought you obelisks from Yebu,} \]
\[ \text{It was I who fetched their stones.} \]
\[ \text{I conveyed to you ships from the sea,} \]
\[ \text{To haul the land’s produce to you.} \]

\[ \text{M. Lichtheim, Egyptian Literature: The New Kingdom, Vol. 2, p. 65} \]

Understanding and using the sources

- What sort of relationship does the inscription suggest that Ramesses has with Amun?
- Make a list of the different ways in which Ramesses has honoured the god.
- What does this inscription reveal about Egyptian religious ideas?

Religious festivals

An inscription in the mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu lists 60 festivals. Two of the better-known annual religious events associated with Amun were the Festival of the Valley and the Festival of Opet, both of which were celebrated at Thebes from the beginning of the 18th Dynasty.

The festival of the Valley

The Valley festival involved an annual procession in which the cult statues of the Theban holy family—Amun, Mut and Khons—were carried from Karnak to visit the mortuary temples of the deceased rulers on the opposite (western) bank of the Nile. This festival enabled families to celebrate with those among their kin who were buried in the western cemeteries.
The Opet festival

The major festival of the Theban religious calendar was the Opet festival, which revolved around the fertility of Amun and the similar sexual potency of the pharaoh. The festival began in the second month of the flood season (akhet) and lasted up to four weeks. Scenes of Opet are featured on the colonnade of the Luxor Temple built by Amenhotep III.

The main event in this festival was a ritual procession in which the cult statue of Amun, accompanied by the pharaoh, high priest and important officials, was transported in a royal barge along the river from the Karnak Temple to the Luxor Temple, about two kilometres away. At the Luxor Temple the king proceeded with the statue to the birth room, where a ritual—probably involving some form of sacred marriage or union of the god and his consort—was performed. This ritual was no doubt intended to confirm the king’s continued favour with the gods and thus ensure the stability and prosperity of the land for yet another year.

The Opet festival was an annual holiday and a time of great rejoicing for the people of Thebes. They would have thronged the processional routes to witness the spectacle in eager anticipation of their share of the lavish food and drink offered to the gods and later redistributed to the people.

The Heb-Sed

The Heb-Sed or Jubilee festival was an important festival of kingship, which served to ensure that the pharaoh was still capable of performing his ritual role. During this ritual the king ‘died’ and was reborn, going through a second coronation. Some of the rites of this festival were celebrated twice, symbolising the pharaoh’s rule over both Upper and Lower Egypt. These ceremonies served to regenerate the king’s powers and renew his relationship with the gods, whose cult statues were honoured guests at the festival.

The Sed festival was usually held after thirty years of a pharaoh’s reign and repeated periodically until his death. However, this practice was not always followed. Many pharaohs, who had shorter reigns are known to have celebrated Sed festivals. Ramesses II, the longest-reigning pharaoh of the New Kingdom, celebrated no less than fourteen Sed festivals during his sixty-seven years on the throne!

Personal religion

The cult of Amun and the festivals celebrated in his name comprised the official religion of the state, which focused on the kingship and the welfare of the country as a whole. The religious beliefs and practices of ordinary Egyptians, however, centred on gaining protection from personal harm and securing the favour of the gods for the immediate needs of everyday life. Many Egyptians worshipped a variety of local and household gods in small village temples and shrines in their own houses.

One of the most popular household gods was Bes, worshipped as a protector of the family. He was associated with sexuality and together with the goddess Taweret (depicted as a female hippopotamus), was a protector of women in childbirth. He was a dwarf god depicted with grotesque facial features and a protruding tongue. This ferocious expression may be linked to his powers to ward off evil, such as keeping snakes away from houses. Bes and Taweret were the most popular deities represented in amulets, which were worn as good-luck charms. Painted images of Bes have been found on the walls of the workers’ villages at Amarna and Deir el-Medina, perhaps indicating rooms connected with women and childbirth.

Neglect of the gods, or blasphemy against them, could lead to punishment. For example, a Deir el-Medina stela erected by a workman called Neferabu records how he had offended the snake goddess, Meretseger, and had subsequently been stricken blind. The penitent Neferabu prayed to the goddess for forgiveness and was cured of his blindness. He set up the stela as a thank-offering.

Ordinary Egyptians could consult the gods for oracles, just as pharaohs did. When individuals petitioned a god, whose statue was being borne in procession, the priests who were carrying the statue
could tilt it in different directions to give ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers to the question asked. These might have ranged from medical queries to matters relating to legal cases. The people of Deir el-Medina, for example, sought oracles from their patron god, the deified Amenhotep I, who had founded the village in the early days of the New Kingdom.

The effects of the Amarna revolution

For a brief period of seventeen years in the late 18th Dynasty, the ‘heretic’ pharaoh, Akhenaten, replaced the state cult of Amun with his own preferred deity, the Aten. This religious revolution was consolidated by the building of a new city, dedicated to the worship of the new god, at the site of modern-day Amarna. The once powerful cult of Amun, together with its temples and priesthood was abandoned and Akhenaten ordered the depictions and names of Amun to be hacked out of reliefs and inscriptions. The worship of other gods also ceased and Aten became the sole god, worshipped only by Akhenaten and his queen, Nefertiti. Ordinary Egyptians were required to pray to the new god through Akhenaten and his wife.

The changes instituted by Akhenaten were, for the most part, short-lived. Within a few years of his death, the cult of Amun had returned to its former position as the chief state religion. However, Akhenaten’s revolutionary experiment had made a deep impression on his successors. The Ramesside kings adopted a religious policy of supporting a number of cults in an attempt to avoid a repetition of the circumstances that had made the Amarna revolution possible. The extraordinary influence that the god Amun had wielded needed to be counterbalanced by recognition of other gods. Ramesside kings, beginning with Seti I, began to include the god Ptah in their titulary. Ramesses II’s successor was named for the god Ptah; his birth name being Mer-en-ptah (Beloved of Ptah). Similarly, Osiris assumes even greater importance in afterlife beliefs during the Ramesside period (see Chapter 4, The legacy of Akhenaten’s reign, p.136).

Different gods were especially honoured in the state-building program. Both Seti I and his successor Ramesses built magnificent temples for Osiris at Abydos, Seti’s Mortuary Temple at Abydos, containing some of the finest relief work of the New Kingdom, has shrines to no less than six gods: Osiris, Isis, Ptah, Amun, Re-Horakhty and Horus. Ramesses II’s temple at Abu-Simbel is dedicated to three gods: Re-Horakhty, Amun and Ptah (apart from Ramesses himself). The gods Re of Heliopolis and Ptah of Memphis also received additions to their temples during the reigns of the Ramesside kings.

Priests—servants of the gods

The main function of the priesthoods of the various religious cults was to cater to the needs of the gods in whose temples they were employed. The temples were the houses of the gods, who were believed to dwell in their cult statues. The daily rituals conducted by the priests involved the presentation of food and drink offerings to the statues, which were also bathed, dressed and adorned. These important rituals were carried out by the high priest, or ‘first prophet’, whose duties had been delegated to him by pharaoh. Only the pharaoh and high priest were allowed into the innermost sanctuary of the temple where the god’s statue was housed.

The ‘second prophet’ was in charge of the agricultural estates and herds of livestock that belonged to the temples and provided for the upkeep of the gods and the temple staff. A large number of priests managed temple produce and property and carried out trade on behalf of the temple; others supervised the workshops and the education of young scribes. Ancient Egyptian priests were not necessarily deeply educated in religious teachings and did not care for the pastoral needs of congregations of worshippers. In fact, the temple was not a place for public worship at all. Ordinary Egyptians were allowed into the outer courtyards of the temple only on special days during the year, usually to consult the oracle.

Only the higher-ranking members of the priesthoods were full-time priests. The lower ranks, called wab priests, worked part-time, usually in rotating four-month shifts. Herodotus tells us that during their period of service, all priests had to be ritually pure. This meant that they had to keep their heads and bodies shaved, wash twice a day and twice a night and wear only the finest linen robes. They also had to be circumcised and abstain from sexual intercourse during their time of service.3 (There was no restriction on marriage for Egyptian priests and celibacy outside priestly service was not required.)

During the New Kingdom the most important religious cult was that of Amun, the chief god of the Theban pharaohs, who waged war in Amun’s name and built towering monuments to his glory. Temple reliefs and inscriptions testify to the vital role that Amun played in legitimising pharaonic rule and in ensuring the continued prosperity of the land. The priesthood of this important god became a wealthy and powerful elite during the New Kingdom; indeed the

high priests of Amun ranked with the top members of the bureaucracy.

The temples were a chief focus of life in New Kingdom Egypt, controlling vast estates and thousands of labourers whose produce was central to the Egyptian economy. The Great Harris Papyrus, in the British Museum, records that during the reign of Ramesses II, 81,322 men worked in the Temple of Karnak, tending over 400,000 livestock. The huge storehouses attached to the temples were major centres for the redistribution of goods.

**For discussion**

- How did New Kingdom pharaohs utilise the state cults to support their reigns?
What were the duties and responsibilities of Egyptian priests?
What were the most significant features of a New Kingdom temple? How did temple design reflect religious beliefs?
How was the Amun cult/priesthood able to achieve prominence during the New Kingdom?
What roles did the following play in the lives of the Egyptian people: oracles, festivals, personal religion?

Activity: essays
Choose one of the following essay topics:
- What role did religion play in the lives of New Kingdom royalty and commoners?
- How important was the temple in New Kingdom society?
- Discuss the role and importance of the Amun cult during the Ramesside period.

For further investigation
- The following is a list of gods from the Egyptian pantheon who were prominent in the New Kingdom: Hathor, Thoth, Sobek, Khons, Montu, Pakhet, Seth, Sekhmet, Ptah, Khnum, Min, Heket, Horus, Mut.
- Research these gods and record your information in a table using these headings: name, special location, description, function.
- Find out more about religious beliefs and practices as revealed by the site of Deir el-Medina.

DEATH AND BURIAL

Funerary beliefs
Central to all Egyptian funerary practices was the belief in the afterlife. During the Old Kingdom the afterlife was a royal privilege only; in the New Kingdom the afterlife became available to all who could afford it. This has been referred to as the democratisation of the afterlife. Of course the most elaborate preparations for the afterlife were made by royalty and the nobility, but the members of all strata of New Kingdom society strove to ensure that they had provided a ‘house of eternity’ in which they could make ‘a goodly burial’. These preparations were designed to guarantee a resting place for their spirit for all time and a place for their mortuary cult to be maintained by the relatives they left behind.

Osiris
Osiris was one of the earliest gods. His status as the god of resurrection rose significantly with the democratisation of religion. By the New Kingdom, not only did the pharaoh become identified with Osiris on his death but his subjects did as well. This had important repercussions for funerary practice. For the deceased to be able to achieve an afterlife it was necessary for the body to resemble Osiris as closely as possible, therefore mummification was essential. This, however, was only one aspect of a true Osirian burial. The deceased also required the correct funerary equipment, including a tomb, canopic chest or shrine, funerary goods and a funeral with all the appropriate ritual. Only when all of this was present could the deceased re-enact the resurrection myth and gain eternal life.

During the reign of Akhenaten, Osiris was rejected along with all other gods except the sun-god—a circumstance that occasioned changes in funerary practice.

The ka and the ba
Egyptians thought that people had several parts to their personalities. This idea was central to their funerary beliefs. There were five parts to the personality: the khet, the ka, the ba, the ‘name’ and the ‘shadow’. At birth, an individual was thought to be provided with a khet (physical body) as well as a ka. The ka was the individual’s creative life-force, a ‘double’ that caused the body to live. The creator god Khnum was sometimes depicted as a potter, moulding both forms of an individual in clay. At death, the khet ceased to function, but the deceased’s ka continued to live, requiring food and drink as had the khet when alive. This is why it was necessary to provide food and drink among other items in the tomb.

An individual’s personality also included the ba, or spirit force or power. The ba was often depicted as a small human-headed bird; sometimes it is shown with human arms as well. Unlike the ka, which was restricted to the tomb, the ba was free to roam far away during the daytime, returning at night to dwell in the mummy. Like the ka, the ba also had needs for food, drink and sexual gratification.

Mummification
Once the khet was dead it was vital to preserve it for the afterlife. The ka was believed to enter the body of

the deceased to benefit from the food and drink offerings left in the tomb. It needed to be able to recognise the body in order to do this, so the preservation had to be effective.

From Old Kingdom times attempts had been made, with varying degrees of success, to preserve the deceased. Removal of the viscera and desiccation with natron became standard practice from the 4th Dynasty. A New Kingdom innovation, which considerably improved preservation, was the removal of the brain. In the 21st Dynasty materials like linen, sawdust and sand were inserted beneath the skin in an attempt to give the dried body a plumper, more realistic appearance. This technique was not always successful.

Although no contemporary Egyptian account of the process of mumification survives, the following sources enable us to reconstruct a fairly accurate picture:

- written evidence from the classical authors Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus
- wall scenes from tombs, which depict some stages of the process
- the remaining mummies themselves.

Modern researchers, such as those involved in the Manchester Mummy project, have mumified various animals in an attempt to find out more about New Kingdom procedures. Dr Bob Brier, an American researcher, has even mumified a modern cadaver, replicating Egyptian techniques.

The New Kingdom funeral

The New Kingdom funeral usually began with a procession of mourners, shown in many tomb scenes accompanying the mummy on its journey across the Nile to ‘the beautiful west’. Often depicted is a second water journey, representing a visit to Abydos, the centre of worship of Osiris, god of the underworld. This journey is thought to have been taken only by the wealthy, but was included symbolically in the tomb, as was another symbolic journey to Busiris in the Delta.

Following the Nile crossing, the mummy, lying in a boat-shaped bier, was dragged to the tomb by oxen sometimes assisted in a token way by the mourners. A priest walked in front of the bier, sprinkling milk and burning incense, while the kites or dryt—two female mourners representing Isis and Nepthys, the widow and sister of Osiris—attended the mummy, wailing and beating their breasts. Behind the bier came a sled bearing the Canopic chest, which contained the viscera of the deceased. The rest of the procession followed.

Tomb scenes depict many servants carrying food and drink for the funeral banquet yet to come, while others carry the possessions of the deceased that will be taken into the afterlife. Also carried on the servants’ shoulders are the boxes of ushabti figures, as well as magical and ritual objects necessary for the performance of the last rites. Some scenes show a sled carrying the tekenu, usually a crouching priest covered by a shroud. This is thought to have represented the embryo, symbol for rebirth. Muu dancers wearing their distinctive tall, white headdresses are shown along with the lector priest, who read the beatification prayers, which would ensure that the deceased became an akh, or justified spirit.

The most important ritual to be performed on the mummy as it was propped up in the courtyard in front of the tomb was the Opening of the Mouth. The sem-priest, wearing the panther skin (his badge of office) used a variety of ritual implements, including the adze, to touch the eyes, ears and mouth of the mummy, thereby restoring all its faculties and bodily functions for use in the afterlife. Following this, the mummy would be purified with natron and offered the foreleg of a calf apparently cut from the animal while it was still alive. This was believed to bring the dead to life, as the leg continued to twitch for some time after it was amputated. All that remained was to place the mummy in its nest of coffins, surrounded by grave goods and food offerings, and to put into place the final magical, protective aids. The final step in the process was to seal the tomb.

The Valley of the Kings

The rulers of the 18th Dynasty chose to build their tombs at Thebes, as this was the centre of their ancestral territory. The earliest of these tombs have yet to be located and identified, but Thutmose I is regarded as having been the first pharaoh to begin a rock-cut tomb for himself in Wadi Biban el-Muluk, or the Valley of the Kings. This dry river valley was to become the royal necropolis for the pharaohs of the 18th, 19th and 20th Dynasties.

The Valley of the Kings offered seclusion and, consequently, a degree of protection for the funerary monuments of a dynasty devoted to Amun, ‘the hidden one’. Just as important, perhaps, was its symbolic appeal. The view across the Nile from Thebes resembled the hieroglyph akhet, meaning ‘horizon’, and the king’s funeral procession, wending its way towards the destination of the setting sun, allowed the king to be symbolically assimilated into the solar cycle. In addition, the mountain peak, El-Qurn, perhaps reminded the New Kingdom Egyptians of the pyramids, the royal tombs of an earlier era.
Ancient societies

The body was taken to the *per-nefer*, or house of mummification, where it was washed and placed on a board. The brain was removed using an iron hook, which was introduced through the broken ethmoid bone (situated at the root of the nose).

The mouth was washed and packed with resin-soaked linen. The eyes were allowed to fall back into the orbits. Linen pads were then placed between the eyeballs and eyelids as false eyes.

The lungs, liver, stomach and intestines were removed through an incision made in the left flank with a flint knife. The heart was left for religious reasons, and sometimes also the kidneys, probably because they were difficult to reach.

The body cavities were washed with palmwine and spices and temporarily packed with natron and resinated bandages. This probably assisted the dehydration process and helped to maintain the body’s shape.

The viscera were washed with palm wine and spices and dehydrated with natron. They were made into four parcels and placed into canopic jars with stoppers in the form of the four sons of Horus. In the 21st Dynasty the parcels were replaced in the abdominal cavity.

The body was straightened into the horizontal position, packed and covered with natron in its natural dry form and left for no longer than forty days.

The lungs, liver, stomach and intestines were removed through an incision made in the left flank with a flint knife. The heart was left for religious reasons, and sometimes also the kidneys, probably because they were difficult to reach.

The temporary stuffing was removed and the body was rubbed with wine. In the 21st Dynasty packing was inserted under the skin at this stage.

The body was anointed with cedar oil and unguents. New stuffing was placed inside and the incision was either sewn or covered in resin and a metal plate. The body was then wrapped in layers of linen bandages with amulets inserted for protection, and returned to the family.

Mortuary temples

In a major departure from Old and Middle Kingdom practice, the royal tombs and mortuary temples of the New Kingdom pharaohs were built in separate locations. In front of the Valley of the Kings stretches a wide plain, and here stood the ‘Houses of Millions of Years’, which, in conjunction with the royal tombs, constituted the funerary machine that carried the pharaohs to their afterlife. In these elaborate and sometimes exquisitely beautiful buildings, the mortuary cult of each pharaoh was celebrated and daily offerings were given to sustain the pharaonic spirits. In later New Kingdom times mortuary temples took on extra functions—that of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, for example, at times acted as a sanctuary, an administrative centre and even a fortress during the 20th Dynasty (see Figure 1.19).

**Figure 1.12** Sequence chart of the mummification process

**Figure 1.13** Vignettes from Ani’s Book of the Dead show Ani’s mummy on its bier being dawn to the tomb by oxen. Mourners and servants bear goods, and the Opening of the Mouth ceremony is carried out in front of the tomb.
Royal tombs

The tombs of the New Kingdom pharaohs were rock-cut axial tombs meaning that each was cut into the living rock along an axis. Common to all tombs were specific architectural and decorative features. For the first time all parts of the royal tomb were decorated and some new funerary texts appeared. A particular innovation of the 19th Dynasty was the inclusion of astronomical scenes on the ceiling of the burial chamber, for example, in the tombs of Seti I and Merenptah (see Figure 1.15).

Tomb design was not static and two stages of development are recognisable in the Ramesside period:
- Early 19th Dynasty royal tombs had parallel axes, the axis of the entry corridor being shifted to one side at the first pillared hall. The second axis then continued in the same direction.
- From the middle of the 19th Dynasty, beginning with the reign of Merenptah, royal tombs had straight axes. This simplified the design, but the proportions used by the architects expanded so that the last tombs of this period have extremely wide and high corridors.

Private tombs

The two major locations of private tombs in the Ramesside period were Thebes and Memphis.

Thebes

The tombs of the nobles were rock-cut structures consisting of a courtyard, a T-shaped chapel and a shaft that descended from inside or outside the chapel to the burial chamber. The statue niche was situated at the end of the long passageway. Painted and relief scenes depicted the daily life of the deceased, the funeral and various scenes of a symbolic nature, including banquets, fishing and fowling, and hunting in the desert. In the 19th Dynasty many of these motifs were abandoned in favour of renditions of the Amduat, Book of the Dead and Book of Gates.

At Deir el-Medina, the tomb-builders of the Valley of the Kings built their own small tombs, consisting of...
an upper chapel topped with a pyramid, a forecourt from which descended a shaft leading to the vaulted burial chamber and a chapel partly cut into the hillside and partly made of mud-brick. The underground chambers were brightly painted with motifs copied from the royal tombs and also depictions of the tomb owner’s family and friends going about their daily activities.

Memphis
The tomb of a Memphite noble had a mortuary chapel built on the desert surface with pylons, pillared courtyards and roofed halls leading to a central offering room. This closely resembled a New Kingdom temple.

The superstructure could also feature a small pyramid. A rock-cut shaft led to the subterranean burial chambers. An example of this is the tomb of Paser, a prominent builder (not the vizier of this name) in the reign of Ramesses II. His tomb is a typical Memphite tomb–chapel, built of mudbrick and featuring three large stelae located in the central court. Interestingly, archaeologists found evidence of four small trees planted in the courtyard. The substructure of the tomb consisted of rough-cut, undecorated rooms.

Funerary texts
Most of our knowledge of the Egyptian concept of the afterlife comes from the many funerary texts of

Figure 1.15 This diagram of the tomb of Merenptah shows the design features and decoration of a single-axis royal tomb of the 19th Dynasty. (a) Entrance, decorated with representations of the sun accompanied by Isis and Nephthys. (b) First God’s Passageway, decorated with scenes of the king adoring Re-Horakhty and scenes from the Litany of Re. (c) Second God’s Passageway, decorated with scenes from the Litany of Re and the Book of Gates. (d) Third God’s Passageway, decorated with scenes from the Amduat. (e) The well shaft, decorated with pictures of various gods and scenes from the Amduat, was situated below the Hall of Waiting. (f) First pillared hall, or Chariot Hall, decorated with an Osiris shrine, scenes from the Book of Gates and of the king greeting the gods. (g) Side room, decorated with depiction of various gods. (h) Repetitions of the First and Second God’s Passageways, decorated with scenes of the Opening of the Mouth ritual. (i) Hall of Truth, decorated with scenes from the Book of the Dead. Here the king could also be shown as a ‘justified’ spirit. (j) House of Gold or burial chamber, decorated with scenes from the Book of Gates and Book of Caverns. The vaulted ceiling was painted with astronomical scenes. (k) The sarcophagus rested on a platform that probably represented the first mound of creation. This, along with the sky decoration on the ceiling, indicated that the burial chamber was symbolic both of the universe and of creation.
the New Kingdom. Some of these developed from the
Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts of earlier periods, but
many first appeared on the shrouds of the royal family
of the 17th Dynasty. The best-known are the ‘chapters
of coming forth by day’, or the Book of the Dead,
usually written on papyri and sometimes on amulets.
Another important collection of texts was known as
the Amduat, or ‘that which is in the nether world’. This
included the Book of Gates and the Book of Caverns,
which dealt with the sun’s journey through the under-
world during the twelve hours of darkness and its sub-
sequent rebirth with the dawn. Unlike the Book of the
Dead, which has been found in both royal and private
tombs, the Amduat was confined to royal tombs during
the New Kingdom and its texts were frequently used
to decorate tomb walls in the Valley of the Kings. The
Litany of Re, which celebrated the identification
of Re with Osiris, was inscribed on the walls of some
New Kingdom royal tombs, beginning with that of
Thutmose III.

Afterlife beliefs
The New Kingdom funerary texts reveal that the after-
life for both king and commoner was a place full of
dangers. These had to be overcome, mostly by magic,
before the deceased could reach their goal of
- joining the gods, particularly Osiris
- joining in the solar cycle as a member of the ‘boat
  of millions’
- working for eternity in Yaru, the ‘fields of reeds’.

Once safely in the realm of Osiris, the deceased
had several obligations to perform. The fields of reeds
was a paradise, and vignettes from Chapter 110 of the
Book of the Dead show the crops of emmer, barley and
flax being harvested, trees laden with fruit, and grain
stacked in heaps. The cultivation of this paradise was
the responsibility of the dead.

Ushabti figures—small figurines made of faience,
wood or stone that were placed in Middle and New
Kingdom tombs—were considered to be servants of
the dead who could carry out this agricultural work for
their masters. They were usually equipped with imple-
ments for such work—picks, hoes and adzes—and
were inscribed with spells that would animate them.
By the end of the New Kingdom a tomb might be
equipped with as many as 401 ushabti figures—one
for each day of the year and thirty-six overseer ush-
abtis to make sure that the rest worked hard!

FIGURE 1.16 Scene from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer, showing the judgment of the dead. (a) In the Hall of
Truth the deceased faces the forty-two assessor gods to whom he denies committing the sins controlled by each god.
This was called the ‘negative confession’. (b) The deceased is led into the Hall of Judgment by Anubis. (c) Anubis
weighs the heart of the deceased against maat, or feather of truth, while Thoth, scribe of the gods, records the
result. If the deceased has not denied any of his sins and his heart fails in the balance, Ammit the Devourer will
eat the heart. This was considered to be a second death or annihilation. (d) Having passed judgment and been
declared maat kheru, ‘true of voice’, the deceased is led by Horus before Osiris. (e) Osiris, attended by Isis and
Nephthys, declares the innocence of the deceased. Osiris sits enthroned on the ‘Lake of Natron’, from which emerges
a lotus bearing the four ‘sons of Horus’—Hapy, Imsety, Duamutef and Qebehsenuef. The deceased now joins the
ranks of the justified and can enjoy eternity in the fields of Yaru, the kingdom of Osiris.
Another vital task of the deceased was to assist the bark of the sun to navigate the duat, or underworld, during the twelve hours of the night. The bark could be caught in the reeds and sandbanks, and the justified dead were needed to help push it free. More dangerous, though, were the forces of evil. These could attack the bark in an attempt to prevent the sun appearing for a new day, so it was essential to defend it. Prominent in the crew were Horus and Seth, but the dead pharaoh was also a crew member. Scenes depicting this nightly journey adorned the walls of royal tombs only.

**Activities**

- **Draw up a three-columned table, headed ‘Tombs’, ‘Architecture’ and ‘Decoration’.** Use the table to compare the architectural and decorative features of royal and private tombs.
- **Imagine that you are a participant in a New Kingdom funeral.** As you stand outside the tomb describe the scene before you, and explain the ritual actions that you undertake.
For further investigation

- Find out what Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus had to say about New Kingdom mummification. How reliable are their accounts in the light of what modern research has discovered about the process?

- The tombs of the following New Kingdom Ramesside nobles are well-known examples of their genre:
  - Userhat and Hatshepsut
  - Kha and Merit
  - Sennedjem and Iineferti
  Choose one pair and find out the following information:
  
  (i) biographical details of the tomb owners, including status and role
  (ii) the tomb’s location, and its architectural and decorative features
  (iii) grave goods found in the tomb.

CULTURAL LIFE

Art and architecture of the Ramesside period

The art of New Kingdom Egypt in general demonstrates the energy and vitality of an expanding imperial power and the influences of foreign contacts and internal developments.

Expansion and conquest, particularly during the 18th Dynasty, added significantly to the royal income and enabled pharaohs to undertake extensive building programs, such as the construction of magnificent palaces and temples that were decorated with statuary and reliefs. The Ramesside kings, like their predecessors, strove to publicise their achievements and ensure their immortality by lavish and grandiose building programs.

The great hypostyle hall at Karnak

One of the finest architectural achievements of the Ramesside period was the construction of the great hypostyle hall between the Second and Third Pylons in the Temple of Karnak. It was begun during the reign of Seti I and was completed by his son Ramesses II. The hall contained two tall central rows each with 12 pillars. Each pillar stood 23 metres high and had an open papyrus capital. The corridor between these two rows formed a magnificent avenue for religious processions. The pillars behind the central rows had closed papyrus capitals and were shorter, thus allowing light to filter in through the spaces between the two ceiling heights. Modern visitors to the Temple of Karnak never fail to be impressed by the sheer scale and beauty of this great hall of 134 pillars, each pillar measuring 15 metres in circumference. They symbolise the thick papyrus marshes of the delta where the first temples were built at the beginning of Egyptian civilisation.

Mortuary temples

The building of mortuary temples was one of the most important activities undertaken by New Kingdom pharaohs. The mortuary temple was situated at the edge of the desert on the western side of the Nile. It was dedicated to the cult of the dead king, who was worshipped as a god in his afterlife. During his lifetime, the king would oversee its design and erection. He would endow the temple with its own estates and income together with a priesthood to maintain the cult of the dead king. The mudbrick granaries and magazines that surrounded the temple stored all of the goods and produce that came into the temple from the extensive estates and trade organised by the temple staff (see Figure 7.4).

In plan, the temples followed the same pattern as the great state temples like Karnak and Luxor; they contained pylons, colonnaded courtyards and hypostyle halls leading to the sanctuary at the innermost part of the temple. The decorative program also conformed to a standard repertoire. The outer walls, or public parts of the temple, featured the great deeds of the king, such as victory in battle. The inner restricted areas contained scenes dedicated to the pharaoh’s relationship with the gods and his conduct of divine rituals.

One of the best known mortuary temples of the Ramesside period is the Ramesseum, Ramesses II’s ‘Temple of Millions of Years’ at Thebes. It was conceived on a grand scale, and today is largely in ruins. It was among these ruins, near the site of one of the tumbled colossi of Ramesses that the poet Shelley is supposed to have composed his famous ‘Ozymandias’—a sobering, even chilling reminder of the vanity of human endeavour: ‘Look on my works ye mighty, and despair’.

More than any other New Kingdom pharaoh, Ramesses usurped the buildings of his predecessors and claimed them as his own. He did this both by replacing their reliefs and inscriptions with his own and by erecting pylons, colossal statues and pairs of obelisks at the entrance to the temples. This was especially the case at the two great Theban state temples of Karnak and Luxor. Ramesses’ works are relatively easy to recognise, not so much for their monumental scale, but for the deeply incised reliefs that he
instructed his artists to execute. He was no doubt fearful that a future pharaoh might try to erase his memory (see Figure 7.6).

The best preserved of all the New Kingdom mortuary temples is the Medinet Habu temple of Ramesses III, who deliberately modelled it on that of his famous predecessor, Ramesses II. Figure 1.19 is an artist’s reconstruction of the complex. It measured 1030 feet by 688 feet, with the central pylons and colonnades constructed of stone and the outer enclosure walls, storerooms and offices for the temple staff made of mudbrick.

Obelisks

Another major engineering achievement of the ancient Egyptians was the quarrying and erection of obelisks, those slender but massive monoliths of granite that New Kingdom pharaohs placed near pylons in the great Temple of Karnak. The quarrying of the obelisks from the quarries at Aswan, 200 km to the south, was a major feat in itself. It required months of labour and the organisation of a huge workforce. The obelisks were towed on barges along the Nile River to their destinations. There they were probably dragged along sloping embankments by teams of workers using ropes. Then they were carefully levered into grooved positions on their pedestal bases.

These obelisks must have been a magnificent sight in ancient Thebes, dominating the skyline and reflecting the rays of the rising sun, the god Amun-Re, in whose honour they were erected.

Art in the late New Kingdom

Despite the failure of Akhenaten’s religious revolution, traces of the Amarna artistic style continued to be seen in the artwork of succeeding reigns. The monumental structures of Ramesses II with their deeply incised reliefs, dominate the art of this period and impress us with their size and grandeur, rather than the beauty of their execution. For beauty, one must look to the temple that Seti I built in honour of Osiris at Abydos. Seti’s sculptors looked back to the reign of Amenhotep III in an attempt to revive its splendours. However, despite the beauty of many of the raised reliefs, they fail to capture the spontaneity and vitality of the earlier age and ‘lack in detail a little of the technical dexterity to be found at the height of the 18th Dynasty’.5

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FIGURE 1.20  The head of a man from the tomb of Ramose, vizier of Amenhotep III and his successor, Akhenaten (left), and two goddesses from the Temple of Seti I at Abydos

FIGURE 1.21  Ramesses II’s temple at Abu Simbel, an example of the monumental architecture of the 19th Dynasty
Ramesside grandeur

What Ramesses II’s monuments lacked in delicacy and beauty they made up for in number and size. Ramesses II has left behind the greatest number of monuments of any pharaoh of any period. He founded the new city of Pi-ramesse near Memphis; constructed a massive mortuary temple, the Ramesseum, at Thebes; and adorned the temples at Karnak and Luxor. He also erected, in addition to numerous other buildings, two magnificent temples for himself and his wife, Nefertari, at Abu Simbel in Nubia. In typical Ramesses II fashion, colossal statues of the king himself, up to twenty metres high, flank the entrances to these rock-cut temples. Remarkably, Ramesses’ temple was oriented in such a way that the rising sun of the winter and summer equinoxes (22 February and 22 October) streamed directly through the front entrance and shone onto the seated statues of three of four gods in the sanctuary sixty metres inside the mountain. The gods that were illuminated were Amun-Re, Re-Horakhty and the deified Ramesses himself. The fourth god, Ptah, being a god of the underworld, remained—appropriately—in darkness.

Art in the 20th Dynasty

Art in this period followed the conventions of the earlier Ramesside period. However, the general decline in the authority of the pharaoh and the downturn in the economy were reflected in the art and architecture. The repertoire of temple scenes, for example, at Medinet Habu, were based on stereotypical themes and lacked the originality and vitality of the best pieces of the reign of Seti I. The sculpture of the 20th Dynasty was generally conceived on a much smaller scale and was poorer in execution and quality. The great days of Egyptian art were now over.

Activities

◆ Imagine that you are Ramesses III discussing the construction of your mortuary temple at Medinet Habu with your architect. What instructions would you give him?

For further investigation

◆ Research some of the prominent New Kingdom temples, such as the Ramesseum and the temples at Luxor, Abu Simbel and Karnak. Record your information in a table under these headings: ‘Location’, ‘Purpose’, ‘Features’, ‘Gods honoured’.

New Kingdom literature

The ability to read and write in New Kingdom Egypt was confined to a small elite. It has been suggested that perhaps only 0.4 per cent of the population may have been literate. Because writing was essential to Egyptian administration and economic organisation, all high-ranking officials began their career with a scribal education. The high status enjoyed by scribes in Egyptian society can be seen in the following extract from the Papyrus Lansing, a well-known 20th Dynasty text used for the training of young scribes. It also gives an interesting insight into pupil–teacher relationships in ancient times.

Source 1.6

Set your sight on being a scribe: a fine profession that suits you. You call for one; a thousand answer you. You stride freely on the road. You will not be like a hired ox. You are in front of others.
I spend the day instructing you. You do not listen! Your heart is like an [empty] room. My teachings are not in it. Take their [meaning] to yourself!


This text, called Be a Scribe, belongs to the genre of New Kingdom literature called ‘School Texts’. Young male scribal apprentices were taught to read and write in schools attached to various departments of the administration, such as the ‘House of Life’ in a temple, or, if they were very privileged, at the royal court itself. Their scribal education consisted of copying out written exercises and learning long passages by heart.

The scripts used during the New Kingdom period were:

Hieroglyphs used for monumental and ornamental inscriptions, especially in temples and funerary buildings. It was a highly decorative script, which required great skill in execution.

Hieratic script used in administrative and literary texts and for everyday purposes such as letters, commercial transactions and legal documents. It was even more simplified than cursive hieroglyphic script and could therefore be written more quickly.
An example of hieratic script can be seen in the Deir el-Medina ostracon. An ostracon is a small flake of limestone used for writing drafts of texts or as a cheap substitute for papyrus.

**Female Literacy**

There is very little evidence for female literacy in ancient Egypt. Since education was available only to males, and for those destined for careers in the administration (which was open only to men), it is very unlikely that many women learnt to read and write. However, evidence from Deir el-Medina suggests that some women at least might have been literate, if only in the hieratic script. These women were responsible for running the home while their men were away on ten-day shifts, building and decorating the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Husbands who were scribes often wrote notes to their wives, requesting food and work materials. Perhaps the female relatives of these scribes could read at least simple messages or perhaps other scribes in the village read the notes for them. It should be remembered, however, that Deir el-Medina was not a typical Egyptian village, and that these women would have been the exception, not the rule.

**New Kingdom literary genres**

A number of different categories of New Kingdom literature give valuable evidence about New Kingdom history and daily life and reflect the important developments and major themes of the period. They include both royal inscriptions and the texts of private individuals, such as autobiographies. There is also a large body of religious texts such as hymns and litanies to the gods, as well as famous funerary texts such as *The Book of the Dead*. One of the most typically Egyptian literary genres was wisdom literature. The Egyptians called these wisdom texts *Instructions*. They were written in a didactic style and offered a guide to upright conduct.

Another category of writing that has been preserved is love poetry, which gives us an entertaining glimpse of romance and courtship, Egyptian style. The Egyptians also loved a good story, and many of these have been preserved in the *Tales*—works of narrative fiction. The cosmopolitan outlook of New Kingdom society is well represented in these tales, which draw on the writers’ knowledge of foreign places and peoples.

All of the literary genres described above, with the exception of school texts and love poetry, were well established before the New Kingdom and some, such as wisdom texts, originated during the Old Kingdom. The New Kingdom *Book of the Dead* had its origins in the famous Old Kingdom *Pyramid Texts*. With the democratisation of religion that occurred after the end of the Old Kingdom, these texts were adopted and added to by generations of private individuals, who, by New Kingdom times, had them inscribed (usually on papyrus rolls) for inclusion in their burials.

**Building inscriptions**

An important collection of inscriptions gives valuable evidence about the royal building programs. These texts include formal prayers of dedication and often contain details of the dimensions, decoration and furnishings of buildings, such as mortuary temples, which may now be largely in ruins. Some of the inscriptions were royal decrees intended to provide for the continued provision of supplies and personnel to maintain the temple or cult of the dead king in his afterlife. A good example of such texts from the Ramesside period are the *Dedication Inscriptions of Seti I* in the Rock Temple of Wadi Mia, the site of an important quarry for gold and stone for the construction of the King’s mortuary temple at Abydos.

**Figure 1.22** This ostracon records a pledge in respect of a debt, which an illiterate workman has asked his foreman to write for him. It translates as ‘Year 5, month 3 of peret, day 22. What the guardian of the estate Penrenenutet said: By Amun and the ruler, if I enter another week without having given this tunic to Harmin, it [my debt] will be doubled to my debit. Done [i.e., written] by the foreman of the gang, Nekhemmut.’
Private inscriptions and documents

In addition to the written evidence provided by royal inscriptions, there is a large body of material from private individuals. These texts include the popular tomb biographies: accounts of the accomplishments and personal qualities of the deceased inscribed on the walls of their tombs. Collections of both papyri and ostraka include a wide range of spells, prescriptions, personal letters, commercial and legal documents, including wills and details of court cases. One of the largest and most valuable collections of private documents, dating mostly to the Ramesside period, comes from the village of Deir el-Medina. The painstaking task of translating the texts was the life’s work of the famous Czech Egyptologist Jaroslav Cerny (see Hurley et al., Antiquity 1, second edition, 2000, chapter on Deir el-Medina, for a fuller discussion of this written evidence).

Hymns and prayers

Much of our evidence for the personal piety of the ordinary Egyptians, so prevalent in the 18th and especially the 19th Dynasties, comes from the hymns and prayers dedicated to various gods and goddesses. They were inscribed on the walls of tombs and on stelae and papyri. A number of funerary stelae were inscribed with hymns to Osiris, the chief god of the dead during the New Kingdom. It is likely that hymns were meant to be recited or sung as part of the prayers and ritual of a cult, as is suggested by hymns preserved in the Chester Beatty IX Papyrus, which instructed that they be sung by temple worshippers. The village of Deir el-Medina contained many private stelae with prayers to particular deities either as petitions or as thanksgivings from the petitioners for an answer to their prayers.

Wisdom literature: the Instruction of Amenemope

The main purpose of the various Instructions was to teach moral values and a code of conduct for living a happy, prosperous and upright life. These texts, which first appeared during the Old Kingdom, remained popular throughout the Pharaonic period.

They contained a variety of maxims, or teachings of a father instructing his son. During the Ramesside period, when personal piety became increasingly important, the Instruction texts became more reflective and conservative in tone. They emphasised the development of character traits such as humility and patience and trust in the gods, rather than worldly success and material wealth. One such text dating to the Ramesside period is the Instruction of Amenemope. The author Amenemope was a scribe and overseer of Akhmim, capital of the ninth Nome of Upper Egypt (near modern Sohag). The text contains 30 sections called ‘chapters’ each dealing with a different theme. The following extract is from chapter 7 of the Instruction.

**Source 1.7**

Do not set your heart on wealth,
There is no ignoring Fate and Destiny;
Do not let your heart go straying,
Every man comes to his hour.
Do not strain to seek increase,
What you have, let it suffice you.
... 
Do not rejoice in wealth from theft,
Nor complain of being poor.
If the leading archer presses forward,
His company abandons him;
The boat of the greedy is left [in] the mud,
While the bark of the silent sails with the wind.
You shall pray to the Aten when he rises,
Saying: ‘Grant me well-being and health’;
He will give you your needs for this life,
And you will be safe from fear.


Love Poetry: ‘Be still my heart!’

Lyric poetry was well-known in Middle Kingdom times, but the genre of love poetry appears to have developed only during the New Kingdom. Some scholars have suggested that its appearance at this time may be attributed to the more cosmopolitan atmosphere of the New Kingdom, when Egypt was exposed to new peoples and exotic ideas from abroad.

Love poems, dating for the most part from the 19th and 20th Dynasties, were written in hieratic script on papyri and ostraca. In their introductory titles some of the collections of poems are called ‘songs’, which suggests that they were intended to be recited, perhaps to the musical accompaniment of harps. It is likely that these songs would have been performed as part of the entertainment at banquets hosted by members of the nobility, scenes of which figure in the tombs of many New Kingdom officials.

The poems are monologues written in the first-person speech of a young man or woman and addressed to the speaker’s own heart. Each poem contains several stanzas, which alternate between the male and the female speaker. The young lovers refer to each other as ‘brother’ and ‘sister’, which were common terms of affection. The poems deal with the theme of longing for the loved one, or offer a catalogue of the lover’s
physical charms. Some poems are joyful recollections of moments—sometimes forbidden ones—spent in each other’s company. The following is from a poem cycle preserved in Chester Beatty Papyrus.

**Source 1.8**

My heart flutters hastily,  
When I think of my love for you;  
It lets me not act sensibly,  
It leaps from its place.  
It lets me not put on a dress,  
Nor wrap my scarf around me;  
I put no paint upon my eyes,  
I’m not even anointed.  
‘Don’t wait, go there’, says it to me,  
As often as I think of him;  
Why do you play the fool?  
Sit still, the brother comes to you,  
And many eyes as well!  
Let not the people say of me:  
‘A woman fallen through love!’  
Be steady when you think of him,  
My heart, do not flutter!


The tales

Some of the most entertaining texts are the fictional tales that are long narrative stories often containing mythological themes relating to the gods. The Tale of Horus and Seth, for example, is a satirical New Kingdom version of the great struggle between Horus and Seth for the kingship of Egypt, which had become vacant with the death of Osiris. A particularly interesting example from the Ramesside period is The Report of Wenamun. Although this text is usually included among Egyptian ‘tales’, it may in fact be a work based more on fact than fiction. The story is set during the reign of the last Ramesside king, Ramesses IX, when Egypt’s fortunes were at a low ebb. Ramesses was forced to share his throne with Herihor, a high priest of Amun (based in Upper Egypt), and with the regent Smendes (based in the Delta). Egypt’s empire was long gone and Egyptians could no longer venture abroad with the same confidence as in former times. So when the Theban official Wenamun undertook a trading mission to Byblos on behalf of his master, Herihor, the expedition was filled with danger. The Prince of Byblos, formerly a vassal of the Egyptian king, could now treat Egyptian envoys with a contempt that would have been unthinkable in former times. While The Report of Wenamun is regarded as a classic of Egyptian New Kingdom literature, it is also particularly valuable for the light it sheds on the society of the period.

**Activity**

Summarise what you have learnt about the different genres of New Kingdom literature by copying and completing the following table. The first one has been done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary genre</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School texts</td>
<td>Writing exercise used in the training of scribes</td>
<td>Be a Scribe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For further investigation

- Read for yourself the complete text of some of the literary compositions to which this section has referred. A good source for these is Miriam Lichtheim’s Ancient Egyptian Literature: The New Kingdom.
- Find some of the following and add them to the information in your summary table: Instruction of Any, Tale of Truth and Falsehood, Tale of the Doomed Prince, Tale of the Two Brothers.
- Improvise a scene or scenes from one of the tales you have read.

**Activity**

HSC hints

The following questions are examples of the kind of structured question you will be required to answer in an HSC paper.

Remember to answer ALL parts of the question. Note the mark value of each question and allocate your time and information accordingly. Note that the last two questions require greater analysis and argument with more sustained use of sources than the other questions.

The sources referred to in part (e) of each question are taken from this chapter of your text.

(a) Briefly define the term ‘obelisk’. (2 marks)
(b) What is meant by ‘The Book of the Dead’? (3 marks)
(c) Describe the main features of the mummification process in the New Kingdom period. (4 marks)
(d) Explain the role played by the vizier in Egyptian society. (6 marks)
(e) With reference to Figure 1.19 and other evidence you have studied, discuss the importance of mortuary temples in New Kingdom society. (10 marks)

or,
(a) Briefly define ‘queen consort’? (2 marks)
(b) What is meant by ‘Valley of the Kings’? (3 marks)
(c) Describe the main architectural features of the Temple of Karnak. (4 marks)

(d) Explain the role of commerce and trade in the New Kingdom economy. (6 marks)
(e) With reference to Figure 1.8 and other evidence you have studied, assess the importance of the pharaoh in New Kingdom society. (10 marks)

**TIMELINE**

The timeline below will give you an overview of the major developments in the New Kingdom from the beginning of the 19th Dynasty to the end of the 20th Dynasty. It will help you to place in their historical context the key themes you have studied in this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>NEW KINGDOM</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>19TH DYNASTY 1295–1188 BC</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revival of the glories of empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace treaty with Hittites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period of dynastic struggle and confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt repels attacks from Libya and sea-peoples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renewed attacks from Libyans and sea-peoples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period of decline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of Nubia weakens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown of centralised government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High priest of Amun becomes pharaoh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>19TH DYNASTY 1295–1188 BC</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramesses I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seti I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramesses II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merenptah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amenmesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seti II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siptah</td>
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<td>Twosret</td>
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| **20TH DYNASTY 1188–1076 BC** |
| Setenakhte | 1188–1186 |
| Ramesses III | 1186–1154 |
| Ramesses IV | 1154–1148 |
| Ramesses V | 1148–1144 |
| Ramesses VI | 1144–1136 |
| Ramesses VII | 1136–1128 |
| Ramesses VIII | 1128–1125 |
| Ramesses IX | 1125–1107 |
| Ramesses X | 1107–1098 |
| Ramesses XI | 1098–1076 |