

Ancient Egyptian Economy & Social Structure

There are many aspects to the Ancient Egyptian economy. The Egyptians traded, educated, and farmed. Additionally, the social structure (social pyramid) in Ancient Egypt was very diverse and reflected a unique system of social classes.

Trade started to happen in the fourth millennium BCE. The Egyptians traded with countries around the Mediterranean Sea, Aegean Sea, and the Red Sea. Items brought from other countries were goods like silver, iron, cedar logs, horses, ivory, copper, cattle, leopard skins, and spices. The main products brought from Egypt were gold and other minerals, wheat, barley, and papyrus sheets. One of the more famous trade expeditions in Ancient Egypt was when Queen Hatshepsut sent an expedition down the Red Sea where they got frankincense, trees, elephants' tusks, ebony, gold, spices, and foreign animals like panthers. Sailors on the trading ships were paid in grain. When their ships stopped to unload, they were able to visit dockside shops to exchange their grain for clothes, fresh fruit, and vegetables.

Egyptians did not have coin money like we do today. When shopping in Ancient Egypt you would have to bargain on a price. Although there were no fixed prices, Egyptians were good at figuring out how much an item would cost. Cost was measured in a *deben* (a copper weight of .5 ounces). For goods like razors or shoes the cost would be one or two *deben*, but for four pigs it would cost more like twenty *deben* which they would trade for something that was worth the same amount.

Jobs in Ancient Egypt included government officials, soldiers, scribes, doctors, merchants, dancers, fishermen, hunters, bakers, carpenters, coffin-makers, spinners, weavers, jewelers, pyramid builders, artists, and farmers. Most Egyptians were farmers. The main crops grown in Egypt were wheat, barley, lettuce, beans, onions, figs, dates, grapes, melons, and cucumbers. The pharaoh was the controller of the jobs.

Between the ages of four and fourteen children attended school. Little boys started learning their father's job when they were four. When they were older they were expected to do the same occupation as their father. Girls and boys both attended school together. They studied reading, writing, and math. Children who were going to be lawyers, scribes, or doctors went to a special school where they studied hieroglyphics. When girls grew up they took to tending the home.

There were **castes** (social classes you were born into) of people by wealth. The social pyramid went like this: at the very top of the pyramid was the pharaoh who ruled all. Below the pharaoh was the upper class and included the pharaoh's royal family, scribes, government officials, priests, and soldiers. Below the upper class was the middle class who included crafters, artists, and other skilled workers like painters, carpenters, jewelers, and brick-makers. Peasants (farmers) were also included in the middle class. The lower class consisted of slaves and servants. There was slavery in Ancient Egypt although it was different from slavery that occurred later in Europe and in North America. Slaves in Ancient Egypt could own land, marry free-born people, and even employ servants. Slavery in Ancient Egypt did not mean "total ownership," which is associated with a later concept of slavery. Sometimes people would be given to the pharaoh as a gift but most people were slaves because they could not pay the money they owed or to escape being poor. Many rich Egyptian families hired servants to work for them.

Over all, with trade, many different jobs, and the weight of the *deben*, the ancient Egyptian civilization had a pretty advanced system of economics and a diverse social structure.

Questions

Make sure you are Restating and Answering the Questions

1. What items did Egyptians trade for with other countries?
2. Describes Pharaoh Hatshepsut's trade expedition.
3. Did Egyptians have coin money like we do today? If so what was it? If not what did they use?
4. What type of jobs did Egyptians have?
5. Describe what lives were like for boys and girls during Ancient Egypt?
6. Was there slavery in Ancient Egypt? Describe some of the rights Slaves had.
7. Draw and put in order the Social Pyramid for Ancient Egypt starting at the top and working down to the bottom.