

New Kingdom Workers



Click on the image for a gallery view

Despite being at the bottom end of the hierarchy of Egyptian society, some workers prospered as a result of growing demand for skilled craftsmen. The records from a special village give us an insight into their lives.

Workers had a higher status than slaves, servants and peasants, but they were not as important as educated professionals such as scribes, doctors and accountants.

The pick of the crop

In fact, workers were not all the same – some were more important than others. For instance, tombs for the pharaoh and his family were built and decorated by Egypt's best craftsmen who were carefully chosen by government officials.

These craftsmen were highly skilled workers who lived with their families in the village of Deir el-Medineh, which still exists today. Their work was secret: pharaohs and their families were buried with huge amounts of gold and other treasures, and tomb-robbing was a major problem.

The village was heavily guarded and the craftsmen themselves were watched to make sure they didn't steal anything.

Bread and beer

Despite the heavy scrutiny, workers of Deir el-Medineh were treated very well. Their houses had several rooms, including a kitchen with an oven for baking, and some had cellars.

Every 10 days they could have two days off and they only had to work an eight-hour day. They could also have time off to brew beer, or mummify a dead friend or relative.

In their spare time, they would work on their own tombs. Unlike the royal tombs, which were decorated with religious pictures, craftsmen's tombs had images showing what their owners hoped for in the afterlife – one much like this, only better.

Dirty work

Despite the status of being a craftsman, the work was dangerous and dirty. Many spent their days in small dark spaces, cutting stone, plastering or painting. Because it was dark, it was easy to trip, so they had to make sure that the baskets of rubble which they carried out of the tombs did not smudge the fresh paint on the walls and ceilings.

After the death of Ramesses II, the workers even went on strike – the first recorded strike in history – because the government was running out of money and was unable to feed or pay them.

Blast from the past



New Kingdom women

Because only the most educated and skilful craftsmen were selected for work on the tombs, Deir el-Medineh was rare in that most of its residents could write – even the women.

Luckily for us, these villagers were obsessive record keepers. They made detailed notes of even the smallest events on bits of pottery and flakes of stone. As a result, their laundry lists, recipes and love letters survive to this day. They give us an amazingly detailed picture of daily life in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago.

Scandal and gossip

These records even include the local scandal and gossip [source material]. For instance, Paneb, a foreman, was notorious for his thieving and adultery. He stole equipment from the sites and the salaries of some of his colleagues – and he had a fondness for other men's wives. Even his own son condemned him for his behaviour.

What is striking is that the worries of the people who lived in Deir el-Medineh weren't very different from those we have today. Like today, sometimes people drank too much or wouldn't do their household chores. These facts all combine to give us a remarkable glimpse into daily life, thousands of years ago.

<http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/newkingdom/workers.html>

Craftsmen/Workers



It's early morning and the sun is rising over Thebes, one of the great cities of the ancient world. Nebtawi is still asleep. He lives in a simple house, set among tradesmen, craftsmen, metalworkers, scribes and stonemasons.

Nebtawi is a master craftsman, so he gets a little extra time in the morning because he doesn't have to show up at work until the others have all arrived. Finally he gets up, gets dressed and joins his family for breakfast. As usual, they sit on the ground and eat with their fingers. Their breakfast is typical: figs, dates and bread, butter and honey, all washed down with fresh milk.

The kids go off to school, then it's time for Nebtawi to go to work. He opens the door to the sounds and smells of the nearby butchers, bakers and shopkeepers getting ready for the day.

Like most other Egyptians, Nebtawi walks to work – a building site where he is supervising the construction of a new temple. The building is complete now, so the site is swarming with artists, who are decorating the fresh plaster on the walls.

It's another hot day and, by mid-morning, Nebtawi needs a break. He finds some shade and drinks some cool wine from a pitcher. But soon he's back on site, checking on the work and stopping occasionally to give some advice or correct some mistakes.

Afternoon

Lunchtime has always been important for site workers and Thebes is no different. Nebtawi joins some other workers for bread and fish, caught earlier that day from the Nile.

Then it's off to a meeting with other master craftsmen, who are working on a number of different projects throughout the city. Before he knows it, work is over. Nebtawi packs up and walks home. When he gets back, he finds his two sons doing their math homework on small pieces of papyrus.

Evening

It's time for dinner and the family sits down to a good meal of roasted meats, lentils and carrots. By the time they're finished, it's getting dark, so Nebtawi lights a small oil lamp and sits back with a cup of beer.

His kids persuade him to play senit, a popular board game. Each player has six wooden cones and must get them to the other side of the board and then back again. They throw four wooden sticks to determine how far each piece can move at any one time.

His sons are getting better at this game and Nebtawi is lucky to win. By the time they finish, it's time to put his boys to bed. Then he and his wife blow out the lamp and hit the sack: time for sleep.

<http://www.pbs.org/empires/egypt/special/lifeas/craftsman.html>