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Religion in ancient Egypt explained the mysteries of the universe and acted as a social glue. The priesthood helped preserve old traditions that underpinned Egyptian culture and its hierarchy helped keep order within society.

Religion and priests were central to everyday life in ancient Egypt. The long history of the priesthood meant that it played a crucial part in maintaining religious institutions, old traditions and the social structure.

Working up the ladder

For most priests, daily life and duties depended largely on their gender and their rank within the hierarchy of priests.

At the top of the tree was the high priest, or 'sem priest', the 'First Prophet of the God'. He was usually old and wise, and would have been a political advisor to the pharaoh as well as religious leader.

Interpreting the universe

On the next rung down were priests who specialized in watching the universe and interpreting its movements. Some were horologists, measuring the hours in the day. Others studied astrology, a discipline which was central to Egyptian mythology, architecture and medicine. The movements of the universe determined temple opening times, crop planting and the level of the river Nile.

One of the most holy jobs a priest could have was to care for an oracle, which usually took the form of a statue. The importance of the job required these priests (known as 'stolists') to keep themselves as pure as possible. To do this, they would shave off all their body hair.

The quest for purity also extended to the afterlife. Stolists were responsible for tending to the needs of the gods, making them symbolic offers of food and sealing the temple shut every night.

Part-time priests

The most common types of priests were called 'wab' or 'lector'. These priests were often in charge of funerals. They are usually pictured reciting prayers or carrying offerings for the dead.

Most only worked part-time, perhaps for just one month a year. When they had finished their duties as priests, they would get on with normal life and go back to their other jobs.

Rules of the game

Whatever their position all priests had to obey a number of strict rules. They could not eat fish (which was seen as peasant food) or wear wool, because most animal products were viewed as unclean. Many priests took three or four baths a day in sacred pools in order to keep themselves pure and male priests were usually circumcised.



Amenhotep III

Money, money, money

The priesthood in Egypt had started out quite simply, with only a few temples for priests to look after. But as the empire expanded and the money began pouring in, the number of temples increased dramatically. This made the priesthood more important and far wealthier than ever before. In particular, the priests responsible for the major gods, such as Amen Re, held a lot of power. By the time Amenhotep III came to power, they were arguably more important than the pharaoh himself. This is because only they could interpret the will of a god and the pharaoh had a duty to fulfill that will.

Something new under the sun

The increased power of the priesthood helps explain why Akenhaten decided to build a new capital at Amarna and change religion. Instead of worshipping many gods, he decreed that the only god was Aten, the sun god, and that only the pharaoh himself could interpret his will.

But Akenhaten's religious fervor brought the empire to the brink of disaster. After his death, his son, Tutankhamen, denounced him as a heretic. The old religion was brought back and, once again, powerful and wealthy priests controlled much of the country.

Priests



It's still dark when Itennu gets up. He's a middle-ranking priest at the great temple to Amen-Re. He has to be ready by dawn, when the assistant high priest gives him his instructions for the day.

As the sun first appears, every priest chants the dawn hymn, "Awake in peace, great god." The most senior priest unseals the sanctuary and says a ritual prayer four times over the image of the god. This gives the god his soul, so that he can take his physical earthly shape again.

The image is then carefully cleaned and rubbed with oil. Incense is burned as its old clothes are removed and the image is re-dressed in white, red, blue and green linen. The dressing is completed with perfume, make-up and jewels.

Now that the god is dressed, it's time for his breakfast. This is a meal of bread, roast meat, fruit and vegetables. Beer and wine are also laid out. Once the priests think the god has eaten all he can handle, the food is removed. It goes back to the kitchens, where Itennu distributes it to the temple staff as part of their wages.

Water is now sprinkled over the sanctuary and the image. The priests wave around more incense and put natron cleansing salt and resin on the floor. They then leave, sealing the sanctuary ahead of the pharaoh's daily visit.

Now Itennu and the other priests practice their chanting while they wait for the pharaoh. Once the visit is in progress, Itennu takes the bull and leads it into the sanctuary. Here, it will be presented to the pharaoh before being ritually slaughtered as a sacrifice to the god.

Afternoon

Once the pharaoh has gone, Itennu and his fellow priests sit down to a lunch of pea and lentil soup, accompanied by fresh bread. Then it's time for an afternoon nap – chanting is surprisingly tiring work.

Nap over, it's back to work. He has to officiate at the funeral of a VIP. Because the man was an important courtier, he may be buried in the highly prestigious Valley of the Kings.

Itennu boards the funeral barge carrying the coffin. It sails across the Nile, is placed on a sled and is then pulled by two oxen to its new home. Itennu supervises the funeral arrangements. He then accompanies the coffin to the tomb, where he says his final prayers. The coffin is then sealed by the masons.

Evening

Back at the temple, Itennu crosses the river again, this time he is going to the "City of the Dead." This is the home of the Egyptian funeral industry. A member of the royal family has died and custom dictates that a priest must oversee the mummification of the body. By sunset it is time to go back to the temple and straight to bed – tomorrow will be another long day.

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