

Teachers Notes

Egypt Old Kingdom

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EGYPT OLD KINGDOM

INTRODUCTION/GEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT

Egypt is one of the most fascinating and significant of our early civilisations. During the earlier dynasties of Old Kingdom Egypt the Pharaohs solidified their control over the country, preparing the way for a long period of stability. The Egyptians of this period had a profound concern for the afterlife which was expressed by massive pyramids, monuments and magnificent works of art. The Old Kingdom, which is sometimes known as the Pyramid Age, was comprised of four main dynasties or lines of rulers, the Third to the Sixth dynasties. Because of the difficulties in establishing an accurate chronology for Egyptian history, it is not possible to put definite dates on this period.

Almost all activities in Egypt from the tilling of the fields to the coronation of the king were determined by the Nile and its annual flood. This flood, referred to as the inundation, was the most important event in the lives of the people. The Nile's life giving waters and annual deposits of rich black soil enabled the Egyptians to develop a prosperous agricultural society. Boats on the Nile provided a major form of transport.

The rich alluvial soil and marshes provided building materials. Sun dried mud bricks were used for all domestic buildings, including the palaces. Limestone and sandstone from the desert cliffs bordering the Nile were the chief building materials used in temples and tombs. Pink and black granite was obtained from Aswan. Papyrus reeds which grew along the Nile provided raw materials for fishing boats, sandals, ropes, baskets and papyrus paper. Some valuable metals such as copper and gold were mined in the deserts, which also was a source for basalt, quartzite and semi precious stones such as turquoise.

In Lower Egypt there were a number of significant sites. Memphis was the religious and administrative during the Old Kingdom, and the site of the royal residence. Saqqara was part of the necropolis of Memphis and is the site of Djoser's step pyramid. Dahshur, south of Saqqara is the site of the Bent Pyramid and the Northern Pyramid both built by Sneferu. Giza is also part of the necropolis of Memphis and is the site of the three great pyramids and the Sphinx. Abusir is the site of the sun temple of Userkaf and has a number of important private tombs.

The traditional southern boundary of Egypt was just south of Aswan at the First Cataract, where outcrops of granite formed a series of rapids.

Deserts on both sides of the Nile Valley provided security from attack by enemies from both the west and east. Contact with Mediterranean countries could be made by sailing north down the Nile. Egypt had contact with many of its surrounding neighbours such as Nubia, Palestine, the Sinai, Libya and Punt.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Necropolis; inundation; cataract; turquoise
2. Map Study: On a map of Lower Egypt, locate Memphis, Saqqara, Dahshur, Giza and Abusir.
3. List the natural resources of Egypt.
4. Research: The importance and power of Memphis in Old Kingdom Egypt.
5. Discussion: In what ways could Old Kingdom Egypt feel secure and independent?
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the annual flooding and inundation?

POLITICAL ORGANISATION AND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The pharaoh or king was the High Priest, the Administrator, the Military Commander and the Law maker in Old Kingdom Egypt. The people believed that the king represented *maat* or the right order in the universe. They believed that without a king on the throne chaos might prevail in both the physical and spiritual world.

In principle everything belonged to the pharaoh. He presided as the god-king over the temples, the towns and all parts of the empire. In practice, power was delegated to priests, administrators and military officers. In return the pharaoh claimed a share of Egypt's annual harvest and the right to conscript troops for his campaigns and labourers for his building projects.

The Vizier was the next most powerful person after the pharaoh. He was the chief justice, the treasurer, the controller of all provincial governors was and responsible for the king's works.

In the provinces, administration was in the hands of the provincial governors or nomarchs, who had a local army at their disposal and were responsible for the census, taxation and justice. They were directly responsible to the vizier, but due to their distance from Memphis, many acquired great power and influence.

High priests of the cult temples were chiefly administrators of temple income and property, rather than spiritual leaders. The majority of priests were part time members of the temple hierarchy. Some members of the priesthood were skilled in such areas as medicine, engineering and architecture and instructed students in schools attached to the temples.

Very little is known about specific queens of this period, but the size and contents of their tombs indicated that they were held in high esteem. The king's principal wife was usually a member of the royal family as it was important to keep the blood line pure. The king was not restricted to one wife and had a number of lesser wives as well as a royal harem. There is evidence that women could reach positions of influence, some becoming priestesses and one obtaining the position of vizier during the rule of Pepi I.

Women had rights comparable to men. They could also own and control their own properties. Women managed the household, cared for children and made everything from clothes to baskets. Women and men worked together in the fields, bakeries and breweries. On larger estates, wives had their own servants and oversaw the farms and workshops. Some women found employment as millers, musicians and doctors. Scribes and lesser officials were next in this non rigid hierarchical system following higher officials and the nobility. Scribes were found in all levels of the administration and were valued for their skills. Scribes were responsible for inspecting, checking, rationing and recording goods and activities for the government, temples and estates. Artisans or skilled craftsmen and tradesmen made up the next level. This class worked both on the estates and as temple and necropolis workers.

The lowest class comprised the agricultural workers, such as peasants, herders and agricultural labourers.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Artisans; *maat*, harem, nomarchs
2. Draw a diagram of the hierarchy of Egyptian society.
3. Outline the role of a nomarch in Old Kingdom Egypt..
4. Research: The role and status of women in Old Kingdom Egypt
5. Discussion: How does Egyptian bureaucracy compare with that we have today?

6. Film Study: What does the film contribute to your understanding of the role and influence of the royal family in Old Kingdom Egypt?

THE ECONOMY

Agriculture was very reliant on the Nile's cycle of floods. Agriculture was the main source of Egypt's wealth and up to three crops could be grown each year. Papyrus plants provided the ingredients for paper, basket ware, sandals and boats. Egypt was self sufficient in wheat and barley, which provided the main staples of the Egyptian diet, bread and beer. The surplus grain was used to trade with other regions. Domestic herds of cattle, sheep, pigs and goat were raised for meat, hides and wool. Hemp was grown as was flax, which was used to make linen. Farmers used canals and ditches to water their fields from the Nile. Cattle and donkeys were used to plough. Crops were harvested with wooden, flint edged scythes, then threshed and winnowed to release the grain. Craft workers produced goods Egyptians needed. There were no factories and most work was done in small shops or stalls. The peasants usually made as much as possible themselves, especially clothes and furniture. There was no formal education for craft workers and skills were learnt on the job. Tools were made from wood, stone, copper and bronze.

There were few proper roads outside of the towns. Shifting sands prevented the building of roads. Most long distance travel was done on boats which sailed up and down the Nile. Most merchant boats did not have decks, but platforms at either end. Cargo was carried in open holds in the middle of the boat. Smaller boats were made out of bundles of reeds tied together, while the larger vessels were built of wood. All goods were carried in this way, including the huge stones that were used to build the pyramids. Wealthier people had their own boats for river travel and carrying chairs for travel by land. Trade with other regions was by boat or donkey caravans. The Egyptians were accomplished sailors and made regular trade and political expeditions across the Mediterranean and Red Sea. Timber for example was not readily available and was obtained through trade from Syria and Palestine. Gold, ivory and amethyst was obtained from Nubia. If trade relations were not possible military force was sometimes used. There was no money used in Egypt. People paid a certain amount of their produce or goods in taxes. In business and trade the barter system

was used, where people swapped different types of goods. The unit of weight to measure goods was known as the deben. The common unit of length was the cubit.

The Egyptians were great architects, engineers and builders. Their skill and ingenuity has been demonstrated by the building of the Great Pyramid, where without modern cranes and mechanical equipment, they were able to construct an edifice over 150metres high, using more than two millions blocks of limestone.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Papyrus; hemp; flax; barter; deben; cubit
2. Map Study: Locate the areas on a map the regions where Egypt traded with her neighbours.
3. Research: List the types of tools and techniques used by the Egyptians in building temples and tombs.
4. Research: The ship building industry in Old Kingdom Egypt
5. Discussion: The pros and cons of the barter system
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the impact of foreign trade on Egypt?

RELIGION, DEATH AND BURIAL

The Pharaoh was worshipped as a living god. It was believed he was the earthly incarnation of the falcon god Horus, the son of the sun god Re, and that he became Osiris when he died. The divine kinship was emphasised by the titles given to the king, the cartouche which surrounded his name and the regalia worn or carried by the king on official occasions. The divine nature could also be seen in the representation of the king in reliefs, towering above all others, as well as the size and splendour of his tomb

The most important ceremony of the king's life, apart from the coronation was the Heb-Sed festival or the king's jubilee. The purpose of the celebration was to ritually rejuvenate the king's power so that he could continue to rule effectively and to commemorate the king's accession to the throne by recreating the coronation ceremony.

Religion was a very important part of the lives of Egyptians. They believed their life and universe was controlled by different gods and goddesses. While there were literally hundreds of different gods, only a number of major gods were part of the official religion associated with

the pharaoh and his chief priest. Ordinary people worshipped both official gods and ones that were important to their community or family. Re developed as the most important god of the Old Kingdom. Pharaohs took 'Son of Re' as their title and the cult of Re became the royal cult. In a land where the sun played such a dominating role along with the Nile, it was natural for the people to worship the sun and solar worship was practiced.

The Osiris myth relates the story of the good king Osiris who was put in a casket, thrown into the Nile and later chopped into pieces by his jealous brother Seth. Isis, his wife/sister magically restored life to Osiris and conceived a child Horus, who avenged his father by killing Seth. In the Old Kingdom only a king could enjoy an afterlife. His family and favoured nobles could share it by being buried close to him. The Pyramid Texts on the walls of King Unas's burial chamber are the earliest detailed record of Old Kingdom beliefs about the afterlife. They are a set of incantations and spells to enable the dead king to pass through the underworld to the afterlife. Egyptians believed that if the dead king was mummified and the proper rituals carried out that Egypt would prosper.

The earliest kings were buried in mastabas, a rectangular structure above ground, with sloping sides and a flat top. The construction of the Step Pyramid is believed to have been built by Djoser in the Third Dynasty. Pyramids were built by other pharaohs. The three most famous are at Giza and were built by Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure in the Fourth Dynasty. Connected with the pyramid tombs were mortuary temples. The Sphinx is part of the complex built for Khafre. The tombs contained carvings and paintings. Tombs were filled with the finest possessions and necessities for the *ka* or spirit.

Members of the nobility and high ranking officials built their own tombs and placed household objects in them. Craftsmen carved and painted scenes from family and everyday life on the wall of these tombs. The most common themes are of the tomb owner and his family, agricultural activities, fishing and fowling, leisure activities, work scenes and funerary activities.

A major source for our knowledge of Egyptian life comes from the scenes carved or painted on the walls of the tombs of nobles or important officials. The tombs of Ankhmahor, Mereruka, Ti and

Ptahhotep have a wide and varied range of representations of life at this time and are a valuable source for both historians and archaeologists.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Cartouche; reliefs; Heb-Sed; cult; afterlife; incantations; *ka*.
2. List ten of the important gods or goddesses. Alongside write their physical representation and their roles and responsibilities
3. Draw a floor plan of the tomb of one of the nobles or important officials. List the types of scenes painted or carved on the walls.
4. Research topics: The myth of Osiris; the Pyramid Texts; the process of mummification
5. Discussion: Why was the Heb-Sed Festival so important to all Egyptians?
6. Film Study: What archaeological evidence does the film present about death and burial in Old Kingdom Egypt?

CULTURAL LIFE

Old Kingdom artists and sculptors were expected to follow certain rules in tomb decorations, but it is possible to see evidence of experimentation and individuality. In the treatment of animals, birds and vegetation, the artists showed their best work. They accurately captured the lines, colours and markings of the flora and fauna found along the Nile and in the adjacent deserts.

The human body was drawn partly in profile and partly frontal. The artist drew the head in profile with the eye fully frontal. Also shoulders were represented in frontal view and the chest in profile. The use of this idealised form would make it difficult to distinguish one tomb owner from another if it were not for the accompanying inscriptions. There were conventions that had to be followed with the use of colour. Women were usually painted in yellow and men in reddish brown.

Another important source of evidence about Old Kingdom Egypt comes from Egyptian writing. The Egyptians were among the first people to develop writing, largely out of a need for the pharaoh and his officials to record all the taxes and produce in their kingdom. The first form of writing was hieroglyphics. However as it was too difficult and time consuming for all documents to be written in full hieroglyphics, scribes developed another simplified script called hieratic.

Hieroglyphics became used only for official and religious writing. Many examples of material written at this time have been unearthed. These include letters, records, royal decrees, religious themes, stories, instructions, poetry, hymns, meditations, magical and medical writings. One significant work, the Westcar Papyrus, is a fragmentary text containing a cycle of five stories about wonders performed by Egyptian priests. Each of these stories was told at the court of Khufu by his sons. The surviving copy of this papyrus consists of twelve rolls and has been used by historians as a literacy source for reconstituting the history of the Fourth Dynasty.

Another notable work, *The Instructions of Ptahhotep* was a literary work written by the vizier Ptahhotep in the Fifth Dynasty at the time of the pharaoh Djedkare. It carefully sets down the rules of behaviour that all wise men should convey to their sons.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Hieroglyphics; hieratic; meditations; royal decrees.
2. Research: Examine a range of the written material from Old Kingdom Egypt.
3. Write a summation of the different stories outlined on the Westcar Papyrus
4. Discussion: The rules of behaviour outlined by Ptahhotep in his literary work. How relevant would this material be today?
5. Film Study: From your viewing of the film, outline the techniques and conventions used by artists and sculptors.

EVERYDAY LIFE

People of all classes enjoyed religious festivals, feasts, sport, music and dancing. There was a variety of musical instruments including harps, flutes and tambourines. Games included board games, ball games and wrestling. Nobles often went fishing and enjoyed hunting birds, gazelles and lions with bows and spears.

The staple food for the peasants was bread made from wheat or barley. Fish caught in the Nile was eaten raw, dried or cooked. Peasants did not eat much meat. On occasions they might eat duck or geese which they had trapped in nets. They ate sour cheese, made from the milk of their cattle, goats or sheep. They ate vegetables such as beans, lentils,

onions, turnips and leeks. Dates, figs and grapes were also popular. Honey was used as a sweetener. The most common drink was beer, which they usually brewed themselves.

Wealthier people enjoyed a better and wider variety of food and had servants to prepare it for them. They ate lamb, goat, gazelle, quail, geese, duck and pigeon. Their range of fruit and vegetables was also broader, with pomegranates, pumpkin, cucumbers, radishes and melon. Spices were used to flavour food. Wine was popular and beer of a better quality.

Egyptian clothes were made of light linen to suit the hot and dry and climate. Women from the higher classes wore tight fitting long dresses that went from their armpits to their ankles. Expensive cosmetics were a sign of wealth. They wore rouge, eye shadow and eye liner made from natural pigments such as yellow ochre and red henna. Eyebrows were plucked and it was common to wear wigs made from hair. Rings, bracelets and anklets were common, as were pectorals, decorated with jewels and precious stones.

Men from the nobility wore make up and jewellery. They wore knee length kilts, belted at the waist. Both men and women used scented oil as perfume. Sandals were commonly worn.

The lower classes usually wore clothes made at home. Men wore loin cloths, sometimes with tunics. They either kept their hair short or shaved it off. Women wore longer dresses. If they could afford it they might wear some cosmetics. Most peasants went barefoot.

Boys of all classes usually went naked. They wore their heads shaved except for a long tress of hair on top. Girls wore simple dresses similar to those worn by women

The upper classes usually lived by the Nile in large villas with many rooms. These houses were made of mud brick and imported wood. They often had tiled floors and the rooms were richly decorated inside. The houses would have had carved chairs, tables, beds, storage chests and headrests. These houses were surrounded by gardens, pens for animals, servants' quarters and high walls.

Artisans lived in houses with two or three rooms. Their houses had earth floors and some might have been decorated with wall paintings. There was little furniture and most meals were cooked outside. The roofs were often used as eating and sleeping areas. Peasants lived in similar but smaller houses to those of the artisans, but with fewer luxuries

The level in Egyptian society generally determined the occupation people had, but it was possible for people to rise to a position of some influence. The nobility filled the more prestigious positions in the bureaucracy and on the estates. Minor officials and scribes were on the next level followed by artisans and other specialist workers. Many of these had positions as temple or necropolis workers working in such occupations as masons, sculptors, artists, temple singers and musicians. Those on the estates could be employed as boat builders, coppersmiths, carpenters or brewers.

Peasants and agricultural labourers made up the bulk of the population and were the backbone of Egyptian society. They toiled in the fields or were involved in peasant crafts such as papyrus production. Many were also employed as herdsman.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Tambourines; pectorals; ochre; henna; pomegranates
2. Design a menu for a feast in Old Kingdom Egypt, using produce relevant to that time.
3. Research: Make a list of the types of leisure activities available to wealthier Egyptians.
4. Discussion: Everyday life in Old Kingdom Egypt compared to everyday life today. What are the more positive features of their lifestyle?
5. Debate: The Egyptians left a great legacy for mankind.
6. Film Study: What does the film reveal about the houses of Egyptians in Old Kingdom Egypt?